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FROM INSPIRATION TO PUBLICATION

RITA DOVE

POET WITH PIZZAZZ

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Taking dance lessons might be a surprising response to a lightning bolt that struck at the heart of Rita Dove's rich literary life, destroying manuscripts and hard drives along with much of her home. But that's exactly what the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet did...and her new collection really cuts a rug.

BY RENEE H. SHEA



AMERICAN SMOOTH

a profile of

RITA DOVE

by RENEE H. SHEA

IN 1998 poet Rita Dove and her husband, German novelist Fred Viebahn, were working in separate rooms of their home when lightning struck. Not lightning, as in inspiration, the kind you'd expect to hit the household of a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, the first African-American poet laureate of the United States—and at the time of her appointment—the youngest. This lightning was the unbridled, force-of-nature kind.

Although neither was physically hurt, Dove and Viebahn watched helplessly as flames spread from the attic, and the second story of the house burned, severely damaging the entire structure and destroying manuscripts, photographs, computer files, and much of their beloved art collection.

The couple was devastated. "At the end of that first numbing week," Dove recalls, "a group of our neighbors came to us with tickets to a benefit dinner dance. They said, 'It's time for you to get out of the ashes. Rita, go buy a dress. Fred, buy a tuxedo. We're going dancing.' It was the best thing they could have done, because they showed us there was still beauty in the world, fun, frivolity."

That neighborly nudge, that certain turn of events, led to a new passion for Dove. After an evening spent admiring the ballroom varieties of cha-chas and waltzes, four couples signed up for a free introductory lesson at Terry Dean's Dance Studio in Charlottesville, Virginia. Six years later, Dove and her husband are still going, recently having performed a *paso doble*, a difficult dance inspired by the movements of the Spanish matador during a bullfight.

And Dove's newfound love of dance has led, in a round-about way, to the publication this month of Dove's eighth poetry collection, *American Smooth* (Norton, 2004). The poems in this collection explore the moods of fox-trots, sambas (her fa-

Photographs by JOHN HENLEY

vorite), and rhumbas, but, she points out, "It's about all sorts of dancing: dancing through the minefields or through any difficult situation. It's about how to walk with pizzazz—which is basically what dancing is."

Dove's no stranger to pizzazz. Her literary career has been filled with it: a Fulbright Scholarship at the Universität Tübingen in Germany, the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for her collection *Thomas and Beulah*, among numerous other awards, including the 2001 Duke Ellington Lifetime Achievement Award and the 1996 National Humanities Medal. This past July, Governor Mark Warner appointed her as poet laureate of Virginia. Along with her poetry collections, she has published a novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (Pantheon Books, 1992), and a play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (Story Line Press, 1994), as well as short stories and essays. Currently the Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia, she will receive her 21st honorary doctorate this October.

As seemingly easy as success has been for Dove, her most recent collection was hard-won. For a while after the fire, even though she was putting the finishing touches on *On the Bus With Rosa Parks* (Norton, 1999), Dove says, "I just

wanted to sit and read magazines. I realize now that I was in shock, though I functioned quite normally. Then the first poem came—"Fox Trot Fridays,"



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from a Nat King Cole song—but for a long while there was nothing." Others, she says, such as "All Souls," began to come in spurts. "I was writing my way out of grief. These were healing poems for me."

Part of her sadness was over the loss of her manuscripts. Although the ones written in ink had become unreadable, University of Virginia's head librarian, Karin Wittenborg, restored the typed ones that had suffered water damage by first stopping the mildewing process in a commercial freezer, then sending them to a freeze-drying facility in upstate New York. Although the fire burned both computers in the

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house, specialists at a data-retrieval company restored some of the files from hard drives that they pried out of the charred casings.

So Dove began new work at the same time she was revisiting older pieces, a familiar process, as she says she works "intuitively, in fragments," with poems in various states of completion at any one time. Over the next several years, including the 11 months she was living in another house while hers was being rebuilt, she sorted through new and evolving poems trying to decide which ones to replace, which ones she needed to carry on.

The routine, the writing ritual is important to Dove. She writes at night, through the night. "My favorite time is from about three [A.M.] until six," and then she sleeps until midday. She prefers to be in her cabin, a one-room structure down a brick path and toward the woods, away from the house, with a porch, a big stuffed "watchdog" from her daughter, Aviva, a couch strewn with colorful throws—and no clocks. Although there is a desk and computer, her favorite way to write is standing up at the long-legged oak desk her father made for her.

Some readers of Dove's work may find *American Smooth* a departure from her earlier work, from such books as *Grace Notes* (Norton, 1989) and *Mother Love* (Norton, 1995), in which the strict forms of the sonnet and villanelle are integral. And Dove admits that there are some technical things she's trying to do differently in her new book. Her title implies this. On the opening page of the book she defines American smooth: "a form of ballroom dancing derived from the traditional Standard dances...in which the partners are free to release each other from the closed embrace and dance without any physical contact, thus permitting improvisation and individual expression."

Indeed, the forms of these poems seem open and innovative. In "Bolero," the long opening line of each stanza, followed by two shorter ones, captures the moves of the dance itself:

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

"Fox Trot Fridays" recalls the pattern of the dance that is "...Smooth / as Nat King Cole's / slow satin smile, easy as taking / one day at a time." A longer poem, "Rhumba," as sensual as the dance for which it is named, is Dove's most elaborate merging of dance and poetry in a kind of synesthesia of sight, musical sound, and touch:

Shape right,
Kick back,
Yearn over him
to meet his thigh,
ripple up his back.

*Here comes the spiral;
let me lead it.
C'mon, milk it, turn
easy, easy...
Don't settle.*

"Boy, did I work on that poem!" Dove says, laughing. "I was preparing a rhumba routine for a showcase, and it dawned on me that I was thinking myself through it at the same time I was pretending not to think it through. I wanted to get that feeling of the rhumba's give-and-take, a tension between the lovers, the partners, a tension that is utterly smooth. So it was important that it function as two separate poems at the same time that it's one interlocking poem."

Dove's association with other art forms, especially music, is well known. Music has been a part of her life since she was a young girl growing up in Akron, Ohio. Trained as a singer, she has performed in choirs and occasionally sings torch songs and blues for benefits. She also plays the cello and the viola da gamba. During her tenure as poet laureate of the United States, she initiated collaborations not just of

music and poetry but of visual art and written texts, insisting that "it's important for people to see the arts aren't separate entities."

The third of the five sections of this collection exemplifies this multimedia idea. Entitled "Twelve Chairs," it consists of thirteen short poems, one for each member of a jury plus an alternate. Although she rarely accepts commissions, Dove says these came about as a result of a collaboration with an architect who was designing the lobby of the federal courthouse in Sacramento. He gave her free rein, but once they agreed on the idea of a jury represented as chairs, she says, "I had to fit these poems on the curved backs of the marble chairs, and they had to work in any order since, in the actual installation, where the chairs are arranged in a circle, there is no sequence as there is on the page." She placed these poems in the center of *American Smooth* "as a fulcrum because [the collection] is all about our particular, American brand of justice."

So the book's not all about cha-cha and fox-trot. In fact, while *American Smooth* may be a technical departure for Dove, it is still true to the combination of lyric, story, and social commentary that has marked her career. Many of the poems deal with race in America and the complexities of war, two subjects of particular relevance. Poems about the 369th African-American regiment have been an abiding interest for Dove. "Because the armed forces were not integrated at that time [World War II], the Americans didn't know what to do with the black soldiers and kept them Stateside," Dove explains. "The French finally said, 'If you don't want these soldiers, give them to us.' So there were these American soldiers under French command, half the uniform French, half American. This is absolutely absurd but typically American—a wonderful symbol of how mixed up things were about race and nationality." The second section, called "Not Welcome Here," includes several poems commemorating these World War I sol-

diers, with such haunting lines as "A soldier is smoke / waiting for wind" ("Alfonzo Prepared to Go Over the Top"). One of the most moving is "The Passage," a lengthy poem made up of a series of dated commentaries written when the speaker was aboard a ship traveling between the United States and Europe, inspired by former corporal Orval E. Peyton, whom Dove met in 1987 in Tucson. He gave her his diary, which burned in Dove's house fire, but not before she immortalized him in this poem.

The dance poems in the first section of *American Smooth* are interrupted by the penultimate "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target," a jarring reminder of violence in war and in a culture that prizes guns. But, Dove asserts, it's not so one-dimensional as that. She acknowledges that she intentionally gave the names of guns—the Glock, the Keltec, "a blunt-nose silver Mossberg"—the ring of poetry: "I was terrified of guns, but a friend of ours convinced Fred and me that we should know about them for safety's sake. When I started shooting, I found a weird pleasure in hitting the target. This is a thought I didn't want to admit to—it's certainly not PC—but it's part of experience. I wanted to write about guns having a certain kind of beauty; there's a sense and elegance to the engineering and physics of them, a poetic quality to their names."

Another theme that continues in *American Smooth* is Dove's reclaiming of iconic African-American figures, especially women. Just as she has written in earlier books about Billie Holiday (in "Canary") and Rosa Parks (in "Rosa"), she both interprets and meditates on Hattie McDaniel, who won an Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*. The title "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove" glides into the opening line of the poem: "late, in aqua and ermine, gardenias / scaling her left sleeve in a spasm of scent." Dove says, "I had that title for probably a year and a half,

but I was waiting for the right push. I can't even explain how it came about except that I had the beat." In a precarious balance of playful wit and grim irony, Dove describes Hattie "poised, between husbands / and factions, no corset wide enough / to hold you in / your huge face a dark moon split / by that spontaneous smile—your trademark, your curse."

Although Dove will give some readings here and there this fall, she's looking forward to the concentrated writing time her next year's leave from teaching will afford. Already she's

planning a series of one-act plays and exploring a musical about, of course, dancing. Her rebuilt hilltop house has a new study with enormous windows opening onto mountain views; the built-in cabinetry and desks are made of sycamore, mahogany, and *goncalo alves*, a South American wood. In a corner of the room is a ceiling-high sculpture that suggests the long branches of a shade tree. "I've always wanted a tree in my study," Dove says. And she's thinking of adding one more touch to the house: an outdoor dance floor. ∞