Rita Dove and Rosa Parks—even the names seem a match: the singing syllables of the first, the sharp consonants of the last—and in her new book of poetry, Dove is *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, that icon of the Civil Rights Movement who made history with her refusal to give up her front seat and move to the back. Of course, since she was not born until 1952, Dove does not actually remember that event in Montgomery, Ala., but reflections on the spaces where public and private histories intersect are familiar terrain in her seven books of poetry. “Being there” seems a relative concept on the journeys Dove takes in her work: “It’s a metaphorical being on the bus,” she explains, “about how you get on the bus one way or the other. There’s no excuse to say, ‘I was too young to have anything to do with that.’ And there’s another part of the title: what it’s like to be made into an icon. I wanted to explore how we’ve idealized Rosa Parks and how she has become bigger than herself, how she let the public adore her, which is a difficult thing to do. She understood it was necessary and did it with grace.”

Dove could be talking about herself. The youngest poet laureate, she did far more than the occasional reading and lecture during her two terms (1993–95), and could, in fact, be called the poet activist. When she did public readings, she filled the house, and she inspired, and still does, the enthusiastic following of a celebrity. She took poetry into classrooms at every level and traveled all over the country on behalf of the arts, all of them. Dove is a strong believer in the interconnection of art forms, particularly music and poetry. “One of the ways poetry moves us is that it engages our entire body. We have to breathe with it. We hear it in our head, and it begins to sing on our
tongue: that’s when it has its grip on us in ways that are not rational, not intellectual.” It is only natural that she has taken her poetry on stage in performance with musicians, such as Wynton Marsalis. Last summer, the Boston Symphony Orchestra performed her song cycle of a woman’s life, *Seven for Luck*, with music from John Williams.

Yet in her work, the pace slows to reflection, and every line, every image, is a testament to her gift for language, her wide-ranging and curious intellect, and her continuous research on life. The poetry in *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* is no exception. Dove looks at Parks from different perspectives, studies, explores her. In “Rosa,” the middle-aged church-going woman seems to be in tableaux: she “sat there/the time right inside a place/so wrong it was ready,” but “In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre, Washington, D.C.” glimpses a more contemporary Parks, almost a spiritual presence in her wheelchair at a camera-clicking film debut. Even as she recognizes the powerful icon Parks has become, however, Dove asks the artist’s question, “What if?”, and turns to others who might have been. In separate poems, she gives two nearly-forgotten women their say, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, who at 15 and 18 respectively, refused to yield their seats, but for various reasons speculated in the poems, were not “chosen” to make history.

So Dove does a little rearranging here, some revising there, and gives “the others” a voice. She’s done this before, particularly with women. In “Belinda’s Petition” (from *The Yellow House on the Corner*, 1980), “An African, since the age of twelve a slave” speaks to “the honorable Senate and House of Representatives of this country,” asking quite straightforwardly in 1782 for the same freedom that they had recently won for themselves. In a later collection titled *Museum* (1983), “Tou Han Speaks to Her Husband, Liu Sheng” is a poem about the emperor and empress during the Chinese Han dynasty in the first century B.C., whose tombs were unearthed in 1968. Dove speculates: “This is my imagination of what she would have said to him if she could have. All we have left is this incredible bejeweled shroud and the bare facts of how they must have lived by the way their corpses were arranged. I saw a picture of that and thought, ‘This was not a happy marriage.’ So, I read more about them, and at some point, put aside all the facts and let her talk.”

Often, the voices in Dove’s poems seem to catapult through time, finding like souls. In “The Venus of Willendorf,” from the new collection, a professor’s aging wife feels a strange kinship with the prehistoric fertility fetish, a statuette of a woman only about five inches long, but who, according to Dove, “is beauty. It’s obvious that the carver loved her.”

But how does Dove know about such obscure figures and know them so well that they act as kindly guides to the poet
and her readers? She says she reads—no doubt an understatement, though perhaps accurate in the sense that her wide and deep reading has accumulated over a lifetime. Currently Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia, she comes from a long line of academic honors starting in 1970 when she was named a presidential scholar, one of the top 100 high school graduates in the country. She graduated summa cum laude from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, attended the university of Tübingen (Germany) as a Fulbright Scholar, and earned her Master of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa. She has received 16 honorary doctorates and a list of prestigious grants. Not limited to the written word, Dove is an accomplished musician—she sings and plays the cello and viola da gamba—and music influences both the subject and form of her work. She writes about Billie Holiday, for instance, and, in the introduction to Mother Love (1995), she explains her fondness for the sonnet in the term’s original meaning of “little song.”

Such a diverse background makes her the acquaintance of a full constellation of real, imagined, and remembered characters, but there’s more; she claims that they “choose” her: “When it happens, you know it—like love! If some person or event is going to make its way into a poem, then they’re going to grab my throat and not let go. I may not know how, but I do know that this is something that’s going to haunt me.”

These are the voices that Dove claims just won’t be still: “I’ve always been obsessed by the voices that are not normally heard. I think it comes from the women I knew as a child, the women in the kitchen who told the best stories. They knew how the world worked, about human nature, and they were wise, are wise. When you are marginalized in any way—race, gender, age, class—you must learn to listen and pay attention very carefully if you are going to survive, and—women have known this since time immemorial—you have to anticipate what is expected of you, what you can get away with, how far you can push yourself. That makes you an extremely sensitive human being. It’s the lemonade you get out of the lemons.”

One of the voices that gripped Dove actually stands atop the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., a statue known as Lady Freedom. Dove had read about the statue being taken down for renovation, and after being appointed poet laureate in spring 1993, she traveled to Washington: “When I stepped out on the balcony of the Poetry Office [at the Library of Congress], I saw Lady Freedom in the parking lot of the Capitol. Later that day I went downstairs and stepped up to the construction fence surrounding her. That was our first ‘official’ meeting, and we liked each other immediately.” Apparently, this Lady, who is nearly 20 feet tall and weighs over 14,000 pounds, chose the diminutive Dove, who began working on the poem during the summer. Dove was fascinated by Lady Freedom’s expression: “Up close, it is compelling, very moving, not like the Statue of Liberty, who is rather daunting, stern, and quite aware of the fact that she is a symbol. Lady Freedom still has a little bit of vulnerability about her, maybe reflecting the nation at that time.” Commissioned in 1855 and dedicated in 1863, Lady Freedom was witness to the racial divide that led to the Civil War and that many would argue remains today. Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, objected to the original design because it included a cap, suggestive of the attire of slave women; later, President Abraham Lincoln hailed Lady Freedom as a symbol of the warring country’s unity. It seems more than coincidence that Dove, who does not accept “assignments” for poems, was invited to speak at the rededication ceremony commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Capitol in fall 1993. “No one but my husband Fred [Viebahn] knew I was working on this poem,” she vows. “Sometimes you do believe in fate.” Into the Congressional Record and onto the Internet, Dove proclaimed: “don’t think you can ever forget her/don’t even try/she’s not going to budge . . . for she is one of the many/and she is each of us.”

While Dove probes what she calls “the life around and underneath the official version” of public history, her private world of family and friends is always close by. She won the
Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for *Thomas and Beulah*, a sequence of poems inspired by her grandparents’ lives. Both lyric and narrative, these led Dove to learn more about her family history and her hometown of Akron, Ohio, to arrive at a “truth” that emerges from the alchemy of fact and imagination. “For my mother, Elvira Elizabeth” is the dedication to this collection, but it is in *Mother Love* that she pays tribute to the powerful bonds between mother and daughter. She looks through the lens of the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, which she says in the introduction to that collection is “a modern dilemma as well” since the moment when a mother must release a daughter from her protection is indeed timeless. In this work, perhaps more than any other, Dove achieves that paradoxical balance between deep involvement and clear-eyed detachment as though she is simultaneously in the midst and watching. This volume is dedicated “For my mother/To my daughter,” and Dove’s complex understanding of both perspectives is compressed in the elegant ending to the poem “Missing”: “I am the one who comes and goes/I am the footfall that hovers.”

Dove is reflective about her own situation right now, that pivotal point of being in between: her daughter and only child Aviva is a 16-year-old sophomore at Mary Baldwin College; her 74-year-old mother, still in Akron, is becoming increasingly frail. Indeed, several of the poems in *On the Bus* seem to take a sidelong glance at approaching middle-age. The speaker in “Testimonial” wistfully recalls when she was “pirouette and flourish... filigree and flame”; in “Gottterdammerung,” the speaker laments her bum knee and hears the mocking clink of her bracelets “as I skulk though the mall/store to store like some ancient/iron-clawed griffin”; and Dove opens “For Sophie Who’ll Be In First Grade in the Year 2,000” on the soulful note, “No bright toy/this world we’ve left you.” Still, Dove denies that she is going through a midlife crisis; rather, she is trying to take in, as she says, “everything that happened in the past several years that accelerated my life. Suddenly I’m sitting here, wondering how I make sense of it all. In the new book there’s that feeling of, well, let’s look around and see where I’ve been and where I’m going to. The whole sequence of Rosa Parks explores the moment when things change absolutely, whether you suddenly become the symbol of an entire movement or whether it’s a moment when you see your life has taken a turn and there is no going back. But I don’t think of it with regret.”

In her novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), Dove notes “the irresistible beauty of someone who had found his place,” and that beauty seems hers at this moment. It is not difficult to imagine Dove herself as the speaker of “The Pond, Porch View: Six P.M., Early Spring” who wistfully recalls “when thoughts were young,” realizing “Where I’m at now/is more like riding on a bus through unfamiliar neighborhoods.” It may be sunset, but it’s the promising sunset of spring, and if Rita Dove is journeying on that bus, it must be full of lively ideas and intriguing companions, who celebrate with the speaker the simple fact of presence: “Here I am.”

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**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.

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**Notes**

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Rita Dove, interview by author, Charlottesville, Va., 6 Nov. 1998.
