An Interview with Rita
Dove
by Elizabeth Alexander
Rita Dove's first collection of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), heralded the arrival of a new voice in American letters. In *Thomas and Beulah*, her third books of poems, Dove reveals her power as a narrative poet in the imaginative retelling of the story of her grandparents' courtship and subsequent life together. The book was awarded the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She has published eight books of poems, and her literary accomplishments extend beyond that form. She is the author of a novel *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), a book of short stories *Fifth Sunday* (1985), many essays (some collected in *The Poet's World*, 1995), including a definitive essay on the work of Derek Walcott, and a play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994), which has been produced to great acclaim in the United States and abroad.

When Rita Dove served as US Poet Laureate from 1993–1995, she revolutionized the office by literally bringing "poetry to the people," in schools, in musical events, and in unusual public spaces. She brought such life to the office that her term was extended, and she has continued to raise the profile of poetry in myriad ways. Among her many literary and academic honors are the 2001 Duke Ellington Lifetime Achievement Award, the 1997 Barnes & Noble Writers Award, the 1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities (from Teresa Heinz), and the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton. She is the Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia. W. W. Norton published her latest collection of poems, *American Smooth*, in September 2004.

Elizabeth Alexander: Let's start with your new dance poems. There are, I believe, many of them, and more to come as well?

Rita Dove: There are more and more to come. In fact, my new book is called *American Smooth*, and dance poems are scattered all through it. I couldn't get them all in this time: There's a samba, a couple of fox-trots, and one long rumba for two voices... but the tango is giving me trouble.

Elizabeth Alexander: Certainly from your very extensive musical training and experience, you've talked about the relationship between musical measures and phrasing and poetic practice. Could you say something along those lines about the forms of the dances and poetic forms as well?

Dove: The interesting thing is that though the dance poems are very musical, I'm trying to find a way to get at the essence of each dance without resorting to mere imitation, so it involves finding a different kind of rhythm. The tango, for instance, is causing me trouble because it's a very dramatic enactment of human interaction, but I avoid recalling the traditional Addams Family stalking rhythm—I don't want that kind of farcical nonsense. It's largely about what happens when you have to perform a particular dance, for instance—or a poem—and the execution of it feel intimate. What happens when you are actually trying to project something very, very personal but there are still rules within which you have to move? Well, let's take what I call in one of my poems ["Brown"] the "European constipated swoon" of the waltz. I was angry at all things traditional in that poem, so obviously I was pissed at everything the Waltz stands for—Convetion,
Strict Tempo, Romance, Decorum, etc. On the other hand, I really do have great respect for waltzes, which are beautiful and very hard to execute well. One can be technically perfect and still look like a marionette; the partners must look like they're in love with each other, even if they're counting their steps. Because if the steps aren't right, it isn't a waltz. Sounds like formal poetry, doesn't it? It's that age-old question of form vs. content—how they inform each other and grow out of each other. And that's what poetry's about, too.

Alexander: Who have you loved to watch dance?

Dove: I love to watch someone as sublimely cool as Gregory Hines. On that same token, Fred Astaire, even though I've heard that he and Ginger Rogers never got along. They couldn't stand each other, but they made it work when they were out there. I love it when someone makes it look easy. Which is what we want to do in poetry too, right? I mean, we want it to feel like it just peels off the top. And this is what we slave over!

Alexander: In an interview with Robert McDowell you spoke about the form of the "Soul Train Line." As in poetry, there is that incredible stricture to that more contemporary popular dance form, but at the same time, in the riff there's that freedom when you have your moment.

Dove: My brother and I couldn't wait for "Soul Train." Now, a dancer had to learn to work the "Soul Train Line." You had to have chutzpah and just say "I'm worth it, and I'm going to go out there and do this thing." If you didn't believe that, then your star moment dancing through the gauntlet would be... well, undistinguished. You had to be able to seize that moment—and even so, you had just seconds in which to do this right. That's why you had some guys doing splits while the girl's standing there thinking, "Hey, you're supposed to be dancing down the line with me."

Alexander: You come from a family of scientists, chemists, and mathematicians. How much of that perspective on the world is a part of you and perhaps a part of your work and your approach to poetry?

Dove: I grew up not being afraid of science. I actually liked math as well. But I also loved poetry and fiction and plays—I think I was brought up to believe there wasn't anything you shouldn't explore just because you thought it wasn't for you or you wouldn't like it.

My father is a retired research chemist. His way of approaching anything, like our math homework, for instance, would be to start out: "Well, you know, X equals this if you do it this way, but let's get out the slide rule and look at it." And we'd be thinking: "No, no. We don't want to learn the slide rule, we just want to know what the answer is!" He would insist on showing us three ways to arrive at the same solution... in the meantime, two hours had passed and we still had other homework to do.

I would go to my brother, who is two years older, and say: "I can't get this problem, but I don't want to ask Dad because you know what'll happen." So we would try to figure it out together, and eventually I learned to do it on my own.

My mother, on the other hand, loves literature. She would be slicing up the roast for dinner and stop to hold out the knife and intone, "Is this the dagger I see before me?" When I was eight or nine I thought she made this up; it would be years before I recognized the quote. There was music in the house too, all different kinds. Not only the music of speech patterns—Shakespeare in the kitchen or my father telling us to look up a word and then talking about the derivation of the word—but all types of literal music as well. My brother and I would try to gauge my father's mood on Saturdays by what music was playing on the stereo. If it was Bessie Smith, we were in trouble—the house was saturated with melancholy. If it was classical music, we were really in trouble—that meant he was in an exacting frame of mind. If it was Josh White, it was O.K. to ask him for a favor.

Alexander: So many of your poems move towards song in that way, or epiphany. Either the poet is more explicitly singing or a character in the poem, usually a female character.

Dove: This is my absolute bias: If a poem doesn't sing, I have no use for it. I simply haven't. Of course there are many kinds of songs. Let's put it this way: If the very sound of those words, the patterns heard in the way they're put down and work together—if that doesn't
...I really do have great respect for waltzes, which are beautiful and very hard to execute well. One can be technically perfect and still look like a marionette; the partners must look like they’re in love with each other, even if they’re counting their steps. Because if the steps aren’t right, it isn’t a waltz. Sounds like formal poetry, doesn’t it?

too? Could I bring this form of delayed gratification—a new sublimation, a new music—into my poetry? Well, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes it’s not even a syntactical thing as much as just a shimmer of apprehension in the sentence, a feeling that the poem is not coming together until its very last word.

Alexander: Is that almost hard-wired now into your own poetic syntax?

Dove: Probably. I’m not conscious of it, so who knows? There are lots of statements set off by dashes in my work, where you have to suspend the whole dashed statement until you get to the end of it. That certainly has its pacing in the rhythms of German syntax. Strange.

Alexander: Allow me to leap again. What about the happy disruption of motherhood?

Dove: That is an endless conversation!

Alexander: Yes, isn’t it? I have read that Thomas and Beulah was a postpartum book for the most part. Is that so?

Dove: Yes, this is true. I had written about a dozen
poems or so for the Thomas section. I wanted to write the stories that I never bothered to ask my grandfather but that my grandmother told me after he had died. And then our daughter started to grow inside of me. We were living in Arizona at the time, and both Fred and I were terrified that parenthood was going to stop the creative juices. So we made up a schedule: One of us would take care of her for a four-hour period, then the other one would take over for the next four hours, and then Parent #1 would take over again. The next day we’d switch the order. It was an elaborate system, engineered to provide a solid day’s worth of writing for each of us, and we persevered in this regimen for, say, two weeks or so. Then we realized we rarely saw each other. So we amended it to four hours apiece with a four-hour segment in the middle where all three of us played together. We kept up this schedule for a long time. It allayed our initial fears, but it also helped both of us learn what it is to be alone with parenting. And we were writing—when you knew you had four only hours, you were raring to go. Around the time of Aviva’s birth, I thought the poem “Dusting” was an isolated poem. But during one of those four hour writing periods, I was looking desperately at the pieces I had written before motherhood, hoping to find some thread to lead me on. I reread the Thomas poems, followed by “Dusting,” and it was almost as if my grandmother looked up from the page and said, “You fool. Don’t you see I have my side of things, too?” Once I realized I had to tell her story, I knew I would have a full book of poems on my hands. And the rest—it wasn’t easy, but it demanded to happen.

Alexander: I love the way that that poem “Dusting” is both in Museum and then moves over to Thomas and Beulah. You mentioned that the poem “On the Bus with Rosa Parks” was a way into the new work.

Dove: It can be rather devastating for a writer to finish a book and have nothing in the pot on the back of the stove. It’s too scary. I’ve never worked that way; I tend to have wholesale bunches of poems left over, poems that haven’t found their home yet for whatever reason. And then there’s this mysterious process of deliberately keeping yourself in the dark, writing poems until the manuscript insists on configuring itself.

Alexander: Your books are all so beautifully sectioned. How can you see that you have more than one thing that goes together and not just a bunch of stray hairs?

Dove: I actually put piles of poems on the floor and walk around them, asking: “Do you want to be over there? You want to be in that group?” I talk to them. I listen to them and then—

Alexander: They get up and go?

Dove: Yes. They edge over there, you nudge one next to another. It’s quite a physical thing, isn’t it? They really have to want to go together. And build their power from each other.

Alexander: You said that when you read the caustic and intense poem “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath for the first time, the poem showed you that you did not have to be polite as a poet. Can you say more about that? It makes me think about those moments where there is an almost violent rupture in your poems—or breakthrough or opening—when you perhaps realize that maybe there’s a way you’ve been making poems, but that there’s a whole other universe of ways to write that you haven’t tried yet.

Dove: To me the scariest and most essential thing about writing poetry is that there are a thousand ways to do it. And there are a thousand paths to explore, each leading in a different direction. Like most poets, I am my own worst enemy. I can find a way to sneak around something I don’t want to confront head on because it hurts, it harms to get deep down in the muck. When I read Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”—I was fairly young, a freshman or sophomore in college—I just kind of went: Wow. This is a seriously rude poem. And it’s not just the vocabulary, it’s not that she says “Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” It’s the whole fairy tale ogre-ish troth of it, absolutely relentless and absolutely exhilarating. I think if there’s one tendency I’m always fighting against in my own work it’s the urge to be polite, because I was raised to be courteous. So that poem was—is—one I hold up inside me as an example and challenge.

Alexander: So many of your lyrics, especially the shorter ones, are so beautifully made, and you’re following along something that is so precisely described, and then there’s an almost violent moment in a single image where it feels like you’re pushing against even the politeness of form.

Dove: Definitely, definitely. If you can get the edges into the form, then that form becomes transformed—it hurts much more, it’s much more disturbing. If something horrific is described so eloquently that you see the beauty in the background even while the horror is happening before your eyes—the glistening of a raindrop on a bright green leaf as someone’s throat is slit—well, your defenses are down, and emotion slips in. After all, our defenses are the only ticket to psychic survival in this world, which is why gratuitous violence—really graphic cinematic violence, for example—is rather useless. Because,
after the first person’s brains get splattered on the wall, all of our defenses come up, and we’re ready to see more without flinching, and we feel strong because we feel in control. But if you are seduced by something because it is beautifully filmed, or sung, or written... and then the violence happens, the horror slips in and gets you. I think that form for form’s sake—any pattern or trope that pleases you simply because of its formal constructs—is a betrayal because it lures us into complacency.

Alexander: I feel as if you’ve just described your poem “Parsley,” that tells the story from two perspectives. The formal arrangement is so tight in the poem, but what’s being described is so horrific, set against the beauty of the repeated villanell line, “there is a parrot imitating spring.” You think it is a beautiful thing at first, but then you’re pulled by the word “imitating.” It’s not real spring, it’s not pure beauty, it’s not green that we can enjoy. It’s everything on the edge of, and as the backdrop for genocide. How did you come to that story and that poem?

Dove: My husband Fred and I were in (then West) Berlin, at a bookstore where writers met every Saturday for champagne and just sit around and gossip. So the German authors were over in one corner carping at each other, and I had gotten up to look at some oversize books on display. One of them was called Petersille, which is German for “parsley”; the cover was white with a brilliant green title. “Gosh,” I thought, “that’s beautiful.” I picked it up and began reading. It was mostly photographs of the Dominican Republic today, but in the preface was an account of the 1937 massacre: that on this particular day in October, General Trujillo slaughtered 20,000 Haitians who worked side-by-side with the Dominicans in the cane fields, by having each worker step up and pronounce the word “parell”; and those who spoke an I instead of r—in short the Haitians, whose French Creole did not provide for an r that was rolled on the tongue—were executed.

I had never heard of this. I remember standing there with the sun streaming onto the open book and the Germans laughing and drinking champagne and then I’m taking notes and thinking, “This can’t be true.” When we went back to the States, I looked it up because I couldn’t believe it, yet I had to make sure. And when I did find references to it, I was so overwhelmed that I put the whole story aside—it was just too big. But that word “parsley” kept sticking in my mind.

One day a line came to me: “There is a parrot imitating spring.” I knew the parrot’s feathers were parsley green. I wrote it down. Yet I resisted that poem for a long time. I didn’t want to go there. I was trying to think of every reason not to write the poem so I said, “Well, I’ve got to make sure there’s a parrot that really is the color of parsley. There probably isn’t; most parrots are multicolored.” Looking for the parrot took up several weeks of research. Then one day—I was teaching at Arizona State University at the time—a student phoned me right before class and said: “I’m working in this pet shop downtown and we have a new parrot who can’t be left alone and the person on the next shift hasn’t come yet. What can I do?” So I asked her, “Can the parrot travel? Can you bring it to class?” “Would you let me do that?” she asked, and I said “Sure.”
It was a poetry workshop, fifteen of us around a conference table. The parrot was rather small, not pure green, and quite well behaved. He amused himself walking up and down the middle of the conference table, picking up pens with his beak and distributing them to other students. He was a great bird, and my student was grateful that I had let her bring him to class.

After class I asked her, “Can you do me a favor? Can you find out if there’s a green parrot, a totally green parrot about the color of parsley?” So she went back to the store, and within a day she came back with the name of an Australian parrot. Once I had verified the parrot’s existence, I said to myself, “O.K., I guess I have to write this poem. Obviously someone wants me to write this poem.” That’s when I started in earnest.

But because the topic was far too big for me to wrap
my soul around, I decided to use form as a way of getting a handle on it. The first part became a villanelle. The second part started out as a sestina, but I've never been able to write a decent sestina—they usually break down after three and a half stanzas. Still, I felt that some sort of repetition was crucial—you know, each cane worker speaking the word “perejil” and either rolling their R, or not and then dying—which was what made me decide to try a sestina. When that faltered, I tossed the second part and showed the villanelle to Fred, who read it and said, “This is good, but it’s not enough.” I stomped off. We have an agreement that we can stomp off after a critique on a work-in-progress, but we're not allowed to debate fine points or explode verbally. Anyway, I knew he was right, which is why I stomped off. And went back and looked at that sestina. And finally just blew the sestina apart at the seams, but left the end words to repeat within the lines. That's how “Parsley” came to be. All told, it took about two years.

Alexander: Interestingly, in the years since then there are now at least two novels, by Julia Alvarez and by Edwidge Danticat, that are based on the same incident. And I wonder—you've also written a novel, you've written the libretto, you've written a verse play, you've written wonderful essays. And on the other hand, you do all of these things, you move in all of these different voices and genre, so there shouldn't be a contradiction. On the other hand, I wonder what does it feel like to be in those different modes. Stories can call writers into all sorts of different forms. So what do you have to say about all the different genres that you work in so successfully?

Dove: First of all I think it's safe to say that if I have an idea—a line or a phrase, something afloat—if an idea gets written down in my notebook, I know right away what genre the final product will be in. It's a mystery to me, too—but I know instinctively if this is a line of poetry or a phrase in a short story or a piece of dialogue in a play.

Poetry is my home; it's what I love to do. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's my favorite child—that isn't done, you know—but it's where I feel at home. The novel is the farthest afield, even further than the essay. Short stories are as torturous to write as poems, because I often feel like—why not just write a poem, I mean, come on—the compressed time, heightened sensibilities—the genre is probably too close to the poem for me, I suppose.

On the other hand, writing my novel was oddly satisfying. I have no guilt when I'm working on a novel, because there's always something to work on when the creative juices aren't flowing. I can stare into space, but I can also straighten up the “he said/she said” parts, or play with getting a character across the room. There's always this feeling of busyness. And the pages pile up and the pile looks good and you feel... substantial. But with poetry—you write, cross out and revise, you work and work and work and in the end what do you have? Mere lines!

Alexander: Or vapor.
Dove: Or vapor. Oh, but I love writing plays. It's a very seductive genre—somehow similar to poems, because you have to leave so much out. Sounds odd, because theatre hinges on dialogue, on talk. But there's gesture, and corporeal interaction—the action committed in silence which deepens the plot—and of course people will say one thing and mean another all the time in plays. With poems you have the luxury of unhurried contemplation—you can read a line over and over—but there's still so much left unsaid. Silence resounds in both genres.

The problem with drama is that it demands an enormous amount of time and energy to get a play produced. If you're serious about wanting to see your work on stage, play writing will take over your life.

Alexander: Well, I wanted to ask you about working with Derek Walcott when he directed a version of "The Darker Face of the Earth" and how that collaboration was and just to hear some more about coming from
The Black Arts Movement was another one of the movements I missed. I would read those poems and thrill to their confidence, their daring.

But I wasn’t much of a writer yet—

I was still in high school.

the poet’s closed shell to the back and forth that is so inherently a part of the play production.

Dove: This play has a long history. After the first draft was completed, I put it in a drawer where it stayed for many years. Periodically Fred would pull it out of the drawer and ask, “What are you going to do with this?” But my poetry career was taking off, and I didn’t have the time to pursue theaters—besides, I’d tell him, no one wants a play with three strikes against it already: It’s historical drama, an adaptation of a classic, and has over twenty characters, most of them African-American. Forget it, no one’s going to take that big of a chance.

But a year later Fred would pull it out again and ask, “What are you going to do with this play?” And finally I grew tired of his bugging me—he was on my back so much that I decided to publish it as a book with Storyline Press.

“O.K.,” I thought, “I don’t know anyone in theater, but maybe it’ll be staged after I’m dead.” Seriously! Then in a case of pure serendipity, it turned out that one of the board members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival was also on the board of Storyline Press, and that person took the play to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival people, who wrote me to say that they wanted to workshop it.

Now, I had no idea what workshopping a play entailed, but I thought, Why not? and agreed. What it meant was three weeks of sitting with actors, a dramaturg, and a director as the actors read the script aloud, scene by scene, and then we’d talk about pacing, character development, etc. They’d try different things, like walking out a scene, different inflections, ad-libbing, stuff like that. The play had had a staged reading before—actors sitting on stage and reading the script before a live audience—and I remember being profoundly embarrassed then. I’m actually an intensely private person and suddenly everyone—I don’t know, I just felt like all my innermost thoughts were being announced in the town square through a megaphone. Even though I obviously conceived of it as a play, it’s very odd.

That workshop, though, was fabulous. The actors were so wonderful—smart, articulate, funny. They would do anything, try a different voice, gait, posture. They were patient. I mean, three- to four-hour sessions every day, and I’m thinking, gosh, most poetry workshops are only two and a half hour long, and here we’ve been working on this one scene for four hours and they’re still at it. And then the fascinating process, you know, of trying to figure out how to tell this play in such a way that the lines won’t be misinterpreted—that’s almost impossible, right? To make sure what’s not being said is “said” in the way you intended.

Two years later, Oregon Shakespeare premiered the play. It was a fantastic production of a controversial drama—Oedipus Rex set on a slave plantation—in a predominantly white town with a sophisticated theater audience that knew its Shakespeare inside out but had little experience with contemporary drama, not to mention black playwrights. I believe it was the first time in the Festival’s then sixty-year history that they premiered an unproven main-stage play. The night before dress rehearsal, we’re sitting in the wings muttering, “This is not a sane idea. We’re all going to be lynched.”

But it was amazing—a standing ovation, people leaping up to applaud and stomp their feet, women having to be helped up the aisles because they were still sobbing. And when you think of how many people are involved in the production—set designer and construction crew and dialect coach, lights and music and costumes and makeup, then those tech guys pulling sixteen-hour shifts in the days before opening—all of this work for these... words on a page... and then it all comes together—well, I’ve never been more exhilarated than that. On the other hand, I’ve never felt more helpless than when the house lights dimmed.
and the play began, because I couldn’t get up on stage and say, “No, do it this way.” It was out of my hands.

**Alexander:** And then how did Derek come to it?

**Dove:** I’m sorry, I leapt ahead of myself; Derek actually came in the year before the premiere. I had come back from the Oregon workshop with a notebook full of suggestions, ready to do a major revision. It was at this juncture that the 92nd Street Y invited me to do another staged reading of the play. I asked Derek if he wanted to direct it—I thought I might as well try—so he read it and to my delight said “Yes.” The only problem was, the Y wanted a ninety-minute version. At this point the full play was a sprawling two hours and forty-five minutes. Since I knew I had to cut it down somewhat anyway, I thought it was a good test to cut it down even further.

So Derek and I sat down with the play and began hacking away. Then he said something very important to me. We were in a coffee shop, scripts spread all over the table, when he poked at the pages and said, “You need some arias in this.” He knew that I sang opera, so I thought he was merely being metaphorical. “Do you mean soliloquies?” I asked, but he repeated: “I mean arias.” You see, I had forgotten that people in plays actually stand up there thinking out loud, they tell the audience their thoughts—and that trope is so over the top, to make it work the language must “sing”—hence, arias.

**Alexander:** That’s right.

**Dove:** Maybe it’s because I find drama so close to poetry that I never considered soliloquies—I thought oh no, characters must always be doing something, even when they’re alone on stage—pouring a drink or pulling back a curtain. When Derek said “aria,” he opened up the possibility of intimacy through performance—in a way, I’m still talking about the Soul Train Line—just getting out there and expressing the very personal in a bold way.

Once I thought about it that way, it was simple. Suddenly all sorts of stage business just disappeared. I could cut out whole sections because I had a character who could sing his or her thoughts. So I trimmed it down to ninety minutes, and then Derek had three days to work with the actors. He ran them through every hoop imaginable; they’d go outside for a smoke and he’d come after them and they’d protest—“This is our break, we need our break”—but he’d grumble, “Come on back in here, we need to do this one more time.” I learned so much from those three days.

**Alexander:** And then it sounds like what you can end up with, too, is something, a play that is true to the powers of poetry.

**Dove:** Right.

**Alexander:** You now have a grown-up daughter: do you feel like there are different kinds of spaces for different kinds of work now that she’s no longer your day-to-day responsibility?

**Dove:** I’m getting used to it, slowly. Because—well, what happened with our daughter is that she left home earlier than planned; she skipped high school and went to college at age 14. I remember thinking, “Hey, I still have things I want to teach you!” I wanted to teach her how to sew, for instance, those kind of things. But she was gone—four years for two undergraduate degrees, and just when we were getting used to the empty nest, she came back to Charlottesville for her master’s. Now she’s gone again, pursuing a PhD in upstate New York. So we’re still figuring out what rhythm life will take. I think Fred and I are just beginning to realize that we have space to start doing other things. It’s a new feeling. You see, way back when we were adhering to those four hour slots, tending the baby—well, eventually the Pulitzer and then the poet laureateship intervened. It became a matter of managing a life instead of living it—coordinating events in the public sphere so that I still had some privacy as well. Even though I enjoyed
talking with people and reading the letters from students and poetry lovers, that was pretty much all I was doing because there weren't enough hours in the day for anything else. So that meant dealing with a secretary and learning how to delegate tasks—figuring out how to dictate a letter, for instance, with all the directives that calls for, saying “full stop” for period and remembering to say “new paragraph.” It was unsettling, but necessary—because if you don’t have any private time, you can become pretty irritable when others ask for “just a little bit of your time.” We’re still working on balancing the two.

For several years I gave very few readings. I stopped deliberately because I felt I was…well, I could hear myself talk; I would listen to my voice pontificating to an audience while making a mental note that I was low on Advil. And I thought, no, no, this isn’t right. It was necessary to get away from the public persona and return to the page.

Alexander: When black power and the Black Arts Movement first burst into the world, what were your responses and feelings? How did those ideas come into your life? Of course, I’m thinking a little bit ahead to the poem “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream” from your first book. But I want to start back with that question.

Dove: Well, I grew up in the ’60s, but I was too young for them, if you know what I mean—there’s a group of Americans born between 1951 and 1953 who kind of fell between the cracks, historically speaking. I was born on that cusp—we were too young to be drafted for Vietnam, though we might have had older brothers who possibly could have gone. Fourteen year olds old rarely put flowers in their hair and set off for San Francisco, but a schoolmate’s older sister might disappear into Haight-Ashbury. We were too young, yet not young enough not to care. So we watched from the sidelines.

The Black Arts Movement was another one of the movements I missed. I would read those poems and thrill to their confidence, their daring. But I wasn’t much of a writer yet—I was still in high school.

Alexander: And where did you read them? Where did you find them?

Dove: They just seemed to be around—well, I did go to the library. I remember standing in the stacks at the main library, reading Alice Walker’s first poetry book. Then there was an anthology. This is terrible, I can’t remember anymore.

Alexander: *Black Fire* maybe?

Dove: No, not that one. And there was Steven Henderson’s _Understanding The New Black Poetry_, which was a seminal book. Then Adam David Miller’s _Dices and Black Bones_. I was trolling for the pieces and having a hard time finding them in Akron, Ohio—stuff came in bits and scraps. But when I got to college in 1970, suddenly there was a torrent. People would put a book in my hands and say, “You have to read this.” Nikki Giovanni came up from Cincinnati to give a reading. Afros were mushrooming, dashikis fluttering—the Black Arts Movement was all around us. The Last Poets LP was playing day and night in somebody’s room and we’d be dancing down the dormitory halls, hopping and nodding to “New York, New York, the Big Apple!”

I was transported by the in-your-face-ness of it, the music of it, the way the Black Arts movement insisted on saying it LOUD. “Black is beautiful”—it’s such a mellifluous line. At the same time, I wanted to write about growing up middle-class in the Midwest. I didn’t come from the ghetto; I was proud to be black but I also wanted to write about being eighteen years old, female, confused.

So I wrote poems, but I did not try to publish for several years, because I was afraid I was going to be told my writing wasn’t “black” enough. I think that until I could accept my life as legitimate—that it did not have to conform to anyone’s program—I didn’t feel confident enough to send my work out. Of course, someone will always try to categorize and label, and there’s not a lot you can do about it. What was good about the Black Arts Movement for me was that, by bringing all this into the open, by demanding that the mainstream acknowledge their well-defined and defiantly jubilant counter-cultural force, they pried open a space wherein the next generation of black artists could write about whatever they wanted. And so although, when I was eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, there were times I felt—let’s say “constrained” by what I thought was expected of me in terms of my blackness, as the years went on, the tide began to turn. Without the Black Arts Movement, I fear my poems might not have “been heard.” Some of the reviews of my early books—_The Yellow House on the Corner and Museum_—seemed, well, benighted: “What on earth is she writing about? There’s no black stuff in here!” Of course, there was “black stuff” all over my poems; but I also wrote about science and math, Greek mythology and road building—topics not necessarily pertaining to sex or class or gender.

Alexander: I have a quotation from Arnold Rampersad in that wonderful *Callaloo* special section where I first
learned of your work. He wrote in 1986 that African-American poetry had recently been, “in a state of inactivity not unlike a deep slumber.” He felt that your work and its example heralded the coming of a new and wonderful era. And so I’m wondering how you felt when he wrote that.

Dove: It felt great, of course, to have someone I admire so deeply proffer such a flattering appraisal. But that deep slumber wasn’t really a slumber; it was more of an interior exile. There were black poets who were literally afraid to publish what they were writing, for fear that it would be lambasted as not being black enough.

Now—and I want to be clear about this—at a certain point I didn’t publish anything because I didn’t think I was strong enough, artistically, to stand up to whatever might come back at me. If you want to publish, I think you must be prepared to take whatever critique comes your way. You can choose not to read it, but the big question is: Are you really ready to put it out there? Now, I don’t think those in the Black Arts Movement intentionally wanted to muzzle poets who had a different agenda; they would have been appalled to hear that other poets were afraid of them. There’s a poem of mine that confronts Don L. Lee [now Haki Madhubuti] as a representative of the Black Arts Movement—

Alexander: Can you tell us a bit about that?

Dove: The poem is called “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, in a Dream.” It’s basically an allegorical enactment of that classic confrontation, the young killing off the old. The older poet calls upon tradition, saying, “Seven years ago” while the younger poet counters with “Those years are gone.”

Alexander: Lashless eyes, hair falling out—

Dove: Yes. The younger poet is asserting her own power while the older poet, a fictionalized Don L. Lee, is still clinging to the past. It’s crazy, because even though I liked Don L. Lee’s work, I needed to blaze my own trail, so I had to clear the path. Haki and I met years and years later, at the Celebration of Black Writers in Philadelphia. I had no idea how he was going to react, but I went up to him and before I could open my mouth he said, “Yeah, you know, that poem was pretty cool.” I said, “I admire your work. I was terrified.” But he just said, “Hey, it has to happen. You got to do those things. That’s O.K.” He understood.

Alexander: Where do you usually write?

Dove: I have a standing desk. For years I had back problems. It’s an occupational hazard for writers, who are always crunched over their desks. My father is an
excellent amateur carpenter and I mentioned to him once that I’d like to write standing up, like Goethe. A couple of years later I was visiting my parents at Thanksgiving and my father said, “Go down to the basement and see if it fits.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but I went down and there it was, a standing desk! My two sisters told me he had nearly driven them crazy, having them pretend to write as he adjusted the height.

That desk is in a little cabin in our backyard—oh, about a hundred yards from the house or so. It’s nothing more than one of those modular storage sheds, but insulated and with windows and a small porch. I had to get away from the fax and phone and unanswered correspondence; I needed to be able to walk into a room where the desk was clear. There’s another desk—a regular desk, one you sit down at—as well. Because I move around when I write; I can’t stay still. I’ll work on one poem at one desk and have another poem-in-progress on the second desk. That’s how I write.

**Alexander:** What were some of the challenges and rewards of being poet laureate?

**Dove:** Before my term had officially begun, I visited the poetry office at the Library of Congress, which is on the top floor of the Jefferson Building. I had two questions: What are my duties, and what is the budget? All I got by way of an answer was a stare. And I thought, oh, boy.

Then I asked, “Well, what’s the hierarchy here at the Library? How do I know who to talk to for whatever I need?” Again, silence. At that point I decided that as long as no one stopped me, I should just go ahead, do whatever I wanted to do until I was told I had run out of money, and we’d figure it out from there. The funny thing was, as soon as I started doing things, the money appeared. Even when I said, “We need to get these Crow Indian children here to read poems to their senator, but they’re minors and the parents insist on coming so we have to fly them all out”—they found money.

The hierarchy at the Library of Congress was slightly Byzantine. I never could quite figure it out, so I went about things as if I were a mad poet. I think it had been a long time since they had someone in that office who actually got out and did projects that required money beyond the funds allotted for the biweekly reading series.
But there were lots of rewarding moments. Let me tell you about one of the most interesting experiences. The biweekly readings were held in the Madison Building, directly across from the Poetry Office. To reach it, Fred and I would park in front of the Jefferson Building, cross at the light, and walk past the usual group of homeless people camped out on the gratings. We’d greet some of them, and they would return the greeting. One night one of the guys called out, “Hey, what’s going on in there anyway?” And Fred said, “A poetry reading. You should come. It’s free, and there’s food.” The next time there was a reading, that guy actually came in. He didn’t go to the reading; he sat outside where the reception was being set up and waited for the reading to be over so he could get the free food. He was discreet about it, so no one bothered him. Then he started to come inside the reading hall and sit in the back. And of course he’d stay for the food afterwards. This went on all year long. Now, my final act as poet laureate was to give a reading from *Mother Love*, which had just come out. At the end of the reading I was signing books when I looked up and saw this guy, holding out a book to be signed. For a moment I couldn’t speak; then I asked his name and he just smiled and I said, “I’m glad you came inside.”

That was a fabulous moment in time. Not because he bought the book, but because Fred had spoken to him and spontaneously mentioned the free food, and because he decided to take us up on the invitation, and because no one told him to move along when he did. And because he was curious enough to check out the readings, and curious enough to stay and listen. I’d like to think that it changed something.

*Alexander:* What advice do you have for young poets?

*Dove:* Advice for an aspiring poet? First of all, keep
aspiring—stay curious, hungry, alive. And secondly, read. It's amazing how many young poets aren't reading. They're writing away, you know, they want everyone else to read their work. I say to them, "Think about it: If you're not going to be reading anybody else, why should anybody else read you?" Also, if you don't like to read, you're not writing for the right reasons. You're not writing because you love poetry; you're writing because you want attention. And yes, we all want someone to listen to us—but poetry involves craft and there's a rigor to the craft that the true poet learns to embrace and loves to see executed in others' poems.

So read. I'd even say: Read indiscriminately, just gobble it up. And don't let anybody suggest to you that this particular poet or fiction writer doesn't have anything to say to you by virtue of his or her race or gender or class or national identity. I would get so angry at young women students who turned up their noses at T.S. Eliot, or the black writer who would read only Eldridge Cleaver because he was young and angry; I was ready to scream: "Dostoyevsky! Read Dostoyevsky, if you want to know something about punishment and torture."

And my third bit of advice, I guess, is to believe that what you have to say, what you have lived and thought and felt, is important and deserves to be told to someone else. That doesn't absolve you from the task of revision. It's not the fact that you've lived it that makes an experience meaningful; that's where you begin. Don't let anyone tell you because you grew up in, say, Akron, Ohio, you can't write about Akron, Ohio because it's not Paris, France. We all can't be from Paris. It's probably very difficult to write about Paris, anyway, so many have written about it before. So—you have your own songs to sing, and there's no event too small or seemingly insignificant that happened to you that may not blossom into a poem.

Alexander: You've been in the "poetry business" for some time now. What would you like to see change? What changes have been for the good?

Dove: Certainly the evolutions in black poetry have been, as the Bible says, "wondrous to behold." I no longer see black poets writing defensively, reacting to the mainstream—they're out there poking into every cranberry that interests them. Attention to craft is slowly gaining credence, a willingness to explore the darker—excuse the pun—sides of human nature instead of trumpeting Positive Black Images. All of this is good, very good. As far as the entire picture goes, I'd have to report: More of the same—same politics, same influence-mongering, same envy and calculated meting-out of praise and prizes. And of course, just when you begin to relax and think attitudes are changing and prejudice is a thing of the past, up pop painful reminders like Garrison Keillor's anthology Good Poems, ostensibly representing the tastes of simple and clear-hearted America but printing only three poems by African Americans out of a staggering 294 selections.
Alexander: What do you think about what's happening in contemporary poetry?

Dove: Do you mean: The more things change, the more things stay the same? Seriously, though: The two major explosives to drop into "recent" American poetry—by "recent" I mean since the Beat Generation—have been the introduction of creative writing into the academic curriculum, and the reassertion of performance poetry—from the Last Poets through Robert Bly to poetry slams. Creative writing programs have raised the level of competency; i.e., mediocrity is more prevalent than melodrama. What this means is that you can have a hard time hearing the great poem for all the well-meant chatter. I'd rather have this problem than what prevailed before: Belle Lettres as the province of the wealthy and elitist, where even as late as 1950 most of the anthologized American poets first achieved a fine education, dabbling in literary magazines at private institutions such as Yale or Princeton, then studied abroad or traveled dreamily about before settling into a solid career as doctor, professor, insurance executive, professional expatriate.

Of course, the business end of poetry is threaded through everything: Creative Writing Programs provide a livelihood, which in turn makes becoming a poet "attractive" rather than "necessary," which means too much chuff and a certain complacency in many a poet's stance, because let's face it—the university environment is hardly a microcosm of the Real World. And the Creative Writing Programs have also engendered that curious mammal, The Poetry Reading. We have poets who read better than their poems, and at the other extreme poets who do their own work no service at all. We have poets who shout and poets who prefer a dramatic monotone; poets who seem to be declaring for more hours than they spend actually writing the stuff. But readings mean money and more importantly—dangerously—audience: The poet not only sells books but also soaks up adulation. I'm not so sure if that's a good thing in the long run. How can an artist dig down deep, past social convention and sheer intellectual curiosity, past childhood fears and adult yearning, to the really scary stuff, the stuff that matters, if he or she is constantly being admired—or at the very least, respected? It's so tempting to write for the strokes.

The introduction of performance into poetry is, in a sense, a return to its roots. The Greeks had several muses for poetry—Calliope for the epic, Erato for love, Euterpe for the pure lyric, Polyhymnia for sacred hymns—because they understood the soul's need for different kinds of song. Well, we children of Postmodernism have sneered at the acolytes of Calliope for so long, narrative and political poems practically disappeared from the literary radar screen. What is Dante's Inferno, after all, but all of the above—epic and lyric, love story and political vendetta?

It's apparent to me that the interplay of slam poetry and rap music has influenced even the more "literary" poets. There's an exciting ranginess to be found in contemporary poetry—longer lines, shaggy dog stories that still manage to weave all the strands together in the end—which I hope will urge even more elasticity from our already supple Americanese!