

RITA DOVE

I first met Rita Dove at the Writers' Workshop in Iowa City. It was September, in the mid-seventies. She came into my office to introduce herself--a vivid, vital presence. She spoke quietly, utterly self-possessed. I think we talked a lot about Ohio, where we had both been born and reared. She had spent the past year or so on a student Fulbright in Germany and I had just returned from a year-and-a-half in England. So we talked about travel too. What struck me immediately was how sophisticated this twenty-two-year-old was: not in any affected, superficial way but sophisticated in the degree of confidence and purpose she projected. She was clearly, already, a person of depth and gravity. She was open without in any way being obvious; well-educated without in any way showing-off. She had dazzle too: she suited her name. She was used to workshops, having studied, as an undergraduate, with James Reiss at Miami of Ohio. Still, Iowa was graduate school and the most competitive in the country. I think we reassured each other that we would both do well, since this was also my first semester at the Workshop. The group of students clustered around this time at Iowa was extraordinary--if I said more than ten names I would still leave someone special out. Rita, of course, was among the best. As I recall, she was in two of my classes that year: a workshop; then, second term, a form-and-theory seminar. Ray Carver, who was living in Iowa City and

primarily a poet in those days, used to make fun of form-and-theory: for him the theory was the form. I was innocent enough to take the course seriously--and I still do--so I had this idea that since the workshop format tends to dote on modest-sized poems--because of space and time limitations as much as those of temperament--we might take Carver's insight at its word. Theory became form. I turned the class into^a writing course directed toward creating a long or sequential lyric, or suite of lyrics. The experiment worked out well, and several students, including Rita, eventually got books from what they started that term. I learned something lasting too from the class: that there is a time to let talent have its say, regardless of the injuries of the struggle; that it is possible to teach in-process without hope of a result. Rita, like the best of the students, was patient with the process, and with me. I remember in conference how reluctant she was to make changes in the text unless those changes advanced the ~~quality~~^{skill} of the writing as well as the content she intended. One has very few students who have both the mission and the means. Rita's commitment and understanding had a profound effect on her sense of form, her sense of economy and understatement, of discipline and containment, her sense of the inherent power of her inherent subject. Even then, as a very young poet, her subject was the story, not the issue.

She refused then, as she has ever since, to exploit her material. She chose instead, because she is at heart an artist, to transform her material in order to meet its dignity and tragedy. Thomas and Beulah began in that form-and-theory class. I had no idea of where it was going or if it in fact would go. But Rita, in her patience and her promise to herself about who she was and what she was making, seemed to have no doubt as to what her sequence of poems, once completed, would add up to. It would take a decade, with the diversions of other work and family, to finish it--or at least publish it. Some years after Iowa I heard her read from a draft of the book and you could see the quality of the future forming. Four of us had been invited to take part in an Ohio-poets celebration at Miami University, Rita's old school. She ^{was} ~~will~~ still not out of her twenties. I read with William Matthews; she read, the next night, with James Wright. For all of us it was a kind of homecoming-- to a group of poets and to poetry, ^{each of us} ~~all~~ from ^{very different places in} ~~the same lonely~~ ^{the} state. I think it was the last time James Wright was ever in Ohio.

Stanley Plumly