



ON THE BUS
WITH
ROSA PARKS

Poems

RITA DOVE

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Books By Rita Dove

BOOKS BY RITA DOVE

The Yellow House on the Corner (poems, 1980)

Museum (poems, 1983)

Fifth Sunday (short stories, 1985)

Thomas and Beulah (poems, 1986)

Grace Notes (poems, 1989)

Through the Ivory Gate (novel, 1992)

Selected Poems (1993)

The Darker Face of the Earth (verse drama, 1994)

Mother Love (poems, 1995)

The Poet's World (essays, 1995)

On the Bus with Rosa Parks (poems, 1999)

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Dedication

for *Aviva*

Dedication

for *Fred*

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Cameos [By Dove, R., 1952-]

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Dove, Rita : *July, 1925* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Lucille among the flamingos
2 is pregnant; is pained
3 because she cannot stoop to pluck
4 the plumpest green tomato
5 deep on the crusted vine.
6 Lucille considers
7 the flamingos, guarding in plastic cheer
8 the birdbath, parched
9 and therefore
10 deserted. In her womb
11 a dull---no, a husky ache.

12 If she picks it, Joe will come home
13 for breakfast tomorrow.
14 She will slice and dip it
15 in egg and cornmeal and fry
16 the tart and poison out.
17 Sobered by the aroma, he'll show
18 for sure, and sit down
19 without a mumbling word.
20 Inconsiderate, then,

21 the vine that languishes
22 so!, and the bath sighing for water
23 while the diffident flamingos arrange
24 their torchsong tutus.
25 She alone
26 is the blues. Pain drives her blank.

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27 Lucille thinks: I can't
28 *even see my own feet* .

29 Lucille lies down
30 between tomatoes
31 and the pole beans: heavenly shade.
32 From here everything looks
33 reptilian. The tomato plops
34 in her outstretched palm. *Now*
35 *he'll come* , she thinks,
36 *and it will be a son* .
37 The birdbath hushes
38 behind a cloud
39 of canebreak and blossoming flame.

Dove, Rita : *Night* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Joe ain't studying *nobody* .
2 He laughs his own sweet bourbon banner,
3 he makes it to work on time.
4 Late night, Joe retreats through
5 the straw-link-and-bauble curtain
6 and up to bed. Joe sleeps. Snores
7 gently as a child after a day of marbles.

8 Joe
9 knows somewhere
10 he had a father
11 who would have told him
12 how to act. Mama,
13 stout as a yellow turnip,
14 loved to bewail her wild good luck:
15 *Blackfoot Injun, tall with*
16 *hair like a whip* . Now

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17 to do it
18 without him

19 is the problem. To walk into a day
20 and quietly absorb.
21 Joe takes after Mama.
22 Joe's Mr. Magoo.
23 Joe
24 thinks, half
25 dreaming, if he ever finds
26 a place where he can think,
27 he'd stop clowning
28 and drinking and then that wife
29 of his would quit
30 sending prayers through the chimney.

31 Ah,
32 Lucille.
33 Those eyes, bright and bitter
34 as cherry bark, those
35 coltish shins, those thunderous hips!
36 No wonder he couldn't leave
37 her be, no wonder whenever she began to show
38 he packed a fifth and split.

39 Joe
40 in funk and sorrow. Joe
41 in parkbench celibacy, in apostolic
42 factory rote, in guilt (the brief
43 astonishment of memory), in grief when
44 guilt turns monotonous.

45 He always knows when to go on home.

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Dove, Rita : *Birth* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 (So there you are at last---
2 a pip, a button in the grass.
3 The world's begun
4 without you.

5 And no reception but
6 accumulated time.
7 Your face hidden but your name
8 shuddering on air!)

Dove, Rita : *Lake Erie Skyline, 1930* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 He lunges, waits, then strikes again.
2 *I'll make them sweat* , he thinks
3 and does a spider dance
4 as the fireflies shamble past.

5 The sky dims slowly; the sun
6 prefers to do its setting
7 on the other side of town.
8 This deeper blue smells
9 soft. The patterns in it
10 rearrange---he cups

11 another fly. (He likes to
12 shake them dizzy
13 in his hands, like dice, then
14 throw them out for luck.
15 They blink on helplessly
16 then stagger from the sidewalk
17 up and gone.)

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18 Sometimes the night arrives
19 with liquor on its breath,
20 twice-rinsed and chemical.
21 Or hopped up, sparking
22 a nervous shimmy. Or
23 dangerously still, like his mother
24 standing next to the stove,
25 a Bible verse rousing her pursed lips.

26 He knows what gin is made from---

27 berries blue. He knows
28 that Jesus Saves. (His father
29 calls it Bitches' Tea.)

30 And sisters---so many, their
31 names fantastic, myriad
32 as the points of a chandelier:
33 Corinna, Violet, Mary, Fay,
34 Suzanna, Kit, and Pearl. Each evening
35 when they came to check
36 his bed, he held his breath, and still
37 he smelled the camphor
38 and hair pomade. Saw
39 foreheads sleek, spicurl
40 embellishing a cheek, lips
41 soft and lashes spiked
42 with vaseline. He waited
43 to be blessed.
44 They were
45 Holy Vessels, Mother said:
46 each had to wait
47 her Turn. And he, somehow,
48 was part of the waiting, he was
49 the chain. He was, somehow,
50 his father.

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51 The latest victim won't
52 get up---just lies there
53 in the middle of the walk
54 illuminating the earth
55 regular as breath.
56 He stomps and grinds
57 his anger in. Pulls
58 his foot away and yellow
59 streaks beneath the sole---
60 eggolk flame, lurid
61 smear of sin.

62 Sisters,
63 laughing, take his shoes away
64 and bring them scraped
65 and ordinary
66 back. *Idiots* ,
67 he thinks. *No wonder*

68 *there's so many of them .*

69 But he can't sleep.

70 All night beneath his bed,

71 the sun is out.

Dove, Rita : *Depression Years* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Pearl

2 can't stop eating;

3 she wants to live!

4 Those professors

5 have it all backwards:

6 after fat came merriment,

7 simply because she was afraid to

8 face the world, its lukewarm

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9 nonchalance

10 that generationwise had set

11 her people in a stupor of

12 religion and

13 gambling debts. (Sure, her

14 mother was an angel

15 but her daddy was

16 her man.)

17 Pearl laughs

18 a wet red laugh.

19 Pearl oozes

20 everywhere. When she was

21 young, she licked the walls free of chalk; she

22 ate dust for the minerals.

23 Now she just

24 enjoys, and excess

25 hardens on her like

26 a shell.

27 She sheens.

28 But oh, what

29 tiny feet! She tipples

30 down the stairs. She cracks a chair.
31 The largest baby shoe
32 is neat. Pearl laughs
33 when Papa jokes: *Why don't*
34 *you grow yourself some feet?*
35 Her mother calls them
36 devil's hooves.
37 Her brother
38 doesn't

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39 care.
40 He has
41 A Brain; he doesn't notice.
42 She gives him of her own
43 ham hock, plies him with
44 sweetened yams. Unravels
45 ratted sweaters, reworks them
46 into socks. In the lean years
47 lines his shoes
48 with newspaper. (*Main*
49 *thing is, you don't*
50 *miss school.*)

51 She tells him
52 it's the latest style.
53 He never laughs.
54 He reads. He
55 shuts her out.
56 Pearl thinks
57 she'll never marry---
58 though she'd
59 like to have
60 a child.

Dove, Rita : *Homework* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 "The Negro and his song
2 are inseparable.
3 If his music is primitive
4 and if it has much that
5 is sensuous, this is simply
6 a part of giving
7 pleasure, a quality

8 ppealing strongly
9 to the Negro's

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10 entire being. Indeed,
11 his love of rhythms
12 and melody, his
13 childish faith
14 in dreams ..."
15 Shit,
16 he'll take Science, most
17 Exacting Art.
18 In school when the teacher
19 makes him lead
20 the class in song,
21 he'll cough straight through.
22 Better
23 columns of figures, the thing
24 dissected to the bone.
25 Better
26 the clear and incurious *drip*
27 of fluid from pipet
28 to reassuring beaker.
29 "The Negro claps his hands
30 spontaneously; his feet
31 move constantly in joyful
32 anticipation of the drum...."
33 Most of all
34 he'd like to study
35 the composition of the stars.

Dove, Rita : *Graduation, Grammar School* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Joe
2 holds both
3 fists out, palms
4 down. *Come on boy, guess .*

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5 The boy
6 hesitates. He knows
7 there's nothing
8 in either one.
9 (The game:
10 Who offers the hand
11 first, man or woman?
12 Who first lowers
13 the eyes? If the hand
14 is not received, whose
15 price is reduced? And
16 what if both are men?
17 Or drunk? Or one is
18 white? The possibilities
19 are infinite.)

20 Joe
21 sees his son
22 flicker. Although
23 the air is not a glass,
24 watches as he puts his lips to
25 the brim---then turns away, bored.
26 *He is not mine, this son*
27 *who ripens, quiet*
28 *poison on a*
29 *shelf .*

Dove, Rita : *Painting the Town* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 The mirror
2 in the hall is red.
3 Pearl
4 giggles: *Pretty*
5 *as a freshly painted*

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6 *barn .* She tugs
7 a wrinkle down.
8 Since she's discovered
9 men would rather drown
10 than nibble,

11 she does just
12 fine.

13 She'd like to show
14 her brother
15 what it is like to crawl
16 up the curved walls
17 of the earth, or
18 to be that earth---but
19 he has other plans.
20 Which is alright. Which is
21 As It Should Be.
22 Let the boy reach manhood
23 anyway he can.

Dove, Rita : *Easter Sunday, 1940* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 *A purity*
2 *in sacrifice, a blessedness*
3 *in shame* . Lucille
4 in full regalia, clustered
5 violets and crucifix.
6 She shoos
7 a hornet
8 back to Purgatory,
9 rounds the corner, finds
10 her son in shirtsleeves staring

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11 from the porch into the yard
12 as if it were the sea.

13 And suddenly
14 she doesn't care.
15 (Joe, after all, came home.)
16 She feels as if
17 she's on her back
18 gain, and all around her
19 blushing thicket.

Dove, Rita : *Nightwatch. The Son.* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 (Aggressively adult,
2 they keep their
3 lives, to which
4 I am a witness.

5 At the other end
6 I orbit, pinpricked
7 light. I watch.
8 I float and grieve.)

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Freedom: Bird's-Eye View [By Dove, R., 1952-]

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Dove, Rita : *Singsong* [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 When I was young, the moon spoke in riddles
2 and the stars rhymed. I was a new toy
3 waiting for my owner to pick me up.

4 When I was young, I ran the day to its knees.
5 There were trees to swing on, crickets for capture.

6 I was narrowly sweet, infinitely cruel,
7 tongued in honey and coddled in milk,
8 sunburned and silvery and scabbed like a colt.

9 And the world was already old.
10 And I was older than I am today.

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Dove, Rita : I Cut My Finger Once on Purpose [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 I'm no baby. There's no grizzly man
2 wheezing in the back of the closet.
3 When I was the only one,
4 they asked me if I wanted a night-light
5 and I said *yes* ---
6 but then came the shadows.

7 I know they make the noises at night.

8 My toy monkey Giselle, I put her
9 in a red dress they said was mine
10 once---but if it was mine, why did they yell
11 when Giselle clambered up the porch maple
12 and tore it? Why would Mother say
13 *When you grow up, I hope you have*
14 *a daughter just like you*

15 if it weren't true, that I *have* a daughter
16 hidden in the closet---someone
17 they were ashamed of and locked away
18 when I was too small to cry.

19 I watch them all the time now:
20 Mother burned herself at the stove
21 without wincing. Father
22 smashed a thumb in the Ford,
23 then stuck it in his mouth for show.
24 They bought my brother a just-for-boys
25 train, so I grabbed the caboose
26 and crowned him---but he toppled

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27 from his rocker without a bleat;
28 he didn't even bleed.

29 That's when I knew they were
30 robots. But I'm no idiot:
31 I eat everything they give me,
32 I let them put my monkey away.
33 When I'm big enough
34 I'll go in, past the boa
35 and the ginger fox biting its tail
36 to where my girl lies, waiting ...
37 and we'll stay there, quiet,
38 until daylight finds us.

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Dove, Rita : Parlor [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 We passed through
2 on the way to anywhere else.
3 No one lived there
4 but silence, a pale china gleam,

5 and the tired eyes of saints
6 aglow on velvet.

7 Mom says things are made
8 to be used. But Grandma insisted
9 peace was in what wasn't there,
10 strength in what was unsaid.

11 It would be nice to have a room
12 you couldn't enter, except in your mind.
13 I like to sit on my bed
14 plugged into my transistor radio,
15 "Moon River" pouring through my head.

16 How do you *use* life?
17 How do you *feel* it? Mom says

18 things harden with age; she says
19 Grandma is happier now. After the funeral,
20 I slipped off while they stood around
21 remembering---away from all
22 the talking and eating and weeping

23 to sneak a peek. She wasn't there.
24 Then I understood why
25 she had kept them just so:

26 so quiet and distant,
27 the things that she loved.

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Dove, Rita : The First Book [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Open it.

2 Go ahead, it won't bite.
3 Well ... maybe a little.

4 More a nip, like. A tingle.
5 It's pleasurable, really.

6 You see, it keeps on opening.
7 You may fall in.

8 Sure, it's hard to get started;
9 remember learning to use

10 knife and fork? Dig in:

11 You'll never reach bottom.

12 It's not like it's the end of the world---
13 just the world as you think

14 you know it.

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Dove, Rita : Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967 [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 For a fifteen-year-old there was plenty
2 to do: Browse the magazines,
3 slip into the Adult Section to see
4 what vast *tristesse* was born of rush-hour traffic,
5 décolletés, and the plague of too much money.
6 There was so much to discover---how to
7 lay out a road, the language of flowers,
8 and the place of women in the tribe of Moost.
9 There were equations elegant as a French twist,
10 fractal geometry's unwinding maple leaf;

11 I could follow, step-by-step, the slow disclosure
12 of a pineapple Jell-O mold---or take
13 the path of Harold's purple crayon through
14 the bedroom window and onto a lavender
15 spill of stars. Oh, I could walk any aisle
16 and smell wisdom, put a hand out to touch
17 the rough curve of bound leather,
18 the harsh parchment of dreams.

19 As for the improbable librarian
20 with her salt and paprika upsweep,
21 her British accent and sweater clip
22 (mom of a kid I knew from school)---
23 I'd go up to her desk and ask for help
24 on bareback rodeo or binary codes,
25 phonics, Gestalt theory,
26 lead poisoning in the Late Roman Empire,

27 the play of light in Dutch Renaissance painting;
28 I would claim to be researching
29 pre-Columbian pottery or Chinese foot-binding,

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30 but all I wanted to know was:
31 *Tell me what you've read that keeps*
32 *that half smile afloat*
33 *above the collar of your impeccable blouse .*

34 So I read *Gone with the Wind* because
35 it was big, and haiku because they were small.
36 I studied history for its rhapsody of dates,
37 lingered over Cubist art for the way
38 it showed all sides of a guitar at once.
39 All the time in the world was there, and sometimes
40 all the world on a single page.
41 As much as I could hold
42 on my plastic card's imprint I took,

43 greedily: six books, six volumes of bliss,
44 the stuff we humans are made of:
45 words and sighs and silence,
46 ink and whips, Brahma and cosine,
47 corsets and poetry and blood sugar levels---
48 I carried it home, past five blocks of aluminum siding
49 and the old garage where, on its boarded-up doors,
50 someone had scrawled:

51 **I can eat an elephant**
52 **if I take small bites .**

53 *Yes , I said, to no one in particular: That's*
54 *what I'm gonna do!*

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Dove, Rita : Freedom: Bird's-Eye View [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 The sun flies over the madrigals,
2 outsmarting the magisterial
3 wits, sad ducks
4 who imagine they matter.
5 What a parade! Wind tucks
6 a Dixie cup up its
7 sleeve, absconds
8 with a kid's bright chatter
9 while above, hawks
10 wheel as the magistrates circle
11 below, clutching their hats.

12 I'm not buying. To watch
13 the tops of 10,000
14 heads floating by on sticks
15 and not care if one of them
16 sees me (though it
17 would be a kick!)
18 ---now, that's
19 what I'd call
20 freedom,
21 and justice,
22 and ice cream for all.

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Dove, Rita : Testimonial [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Back when the earth was new
2 and heaven just a whisper,
3 back when the names of things
4 hadn't had time to stick;

5 back when the smallest breezes
6 melted summer into autumn,
7 when all the poplars quivered
8 sweetly in rank and file ...

9 the world called, and I answered.

10 Each glance ignited to a gaze.
11 I caught my breath and called that life,
12 swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet.

13 I was pirouette and flourish,
14 I was filigree and flame.
15 How could I count my blessings
16 when I didn't know their names?

17 Back when everything was still to come,
18 luck leaked out everywhere.
19 I gave my promise to the world,
20 and the world followed me here.

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Dove, Rita : Dawn Revisited [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Imagine you wake up
2 with a second chance: The blue jay
3 hawks his pretty wares
4 and the oak still stands, spreading
5 glorious shade. If you don't look back,

6 the future never happens.
7 How good to rise in sunlight,
8 in the prodigal smell of biscuits---
9 eggs and sausage on the grill.
10 The whole sky is yours

11 to write on, blown open
12 to a blank page. Come on,
13 shake a leg! You'll never know
14 who's down there, frying those eggs,
15 if you don't get up and see.

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Black on a Saturday Night [By Dove, R., 1952-]

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Dove, Rita : My Mother Enters the Work Force [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 The path to ABC Business School
2 was paid for by a lucky sign:
3 **Alterations, Qualified Seamstress Inquire Within .**
4 Tested on sleeves, hers
5 never puckered---puffed or sleek,
6 leg-o'-mutton or raglan---
7 they barely needed the damp cloth
8 to steam them perfect.

9 Those were the afternoons. Evenings
10 she took in piecework, the treadle machine
11 with its locomotive whir
12 traveling the lit path of the needle
13 through quicksand taffeta
14 or velvet deep as a forest.
15 *And now and now* sang the treadle,
16 *I know, I know*

17 And then it was day again, all morning
18 at the office machines, their clack and chatter
19 another journey---rougher,
20 that would go on forever
21 until she could break a hundred words
22 with no errors---ah, and then

23 no more postponed groceries,
24 and that blue pair of shoes!

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Dove, Rita : Black on a Saturday Night [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 This is no place for lilac
2 or somebody on a trip
3 to themselves. Hips
4 are an asset here, and color
5 calculated to flash
6 lemon bronze cerise
7 in the course of a dip and turn.
8 Beauty's been caught lying
9 and the truth's rubbed raw:
10 Here, you get your remorse
11 as a constitutional right.

12 It's always what we don't
13 fear that happens, always
14 not now and why are
15 you people acting this way
16 (meaning we put in petunias
17 instead of hydrangeas and reject
18 ecru as a fashion statement).

19 But we can't do it---naw, because
20 the wages of living are sin
21 and the wages of sin are love
22 and the wages of love are pain
23 and the wages of pain are philosophy
24 and that leads definitely to an attitude
25 and an attitude will get you
26 nowhere fast so you might as well
27 keep dancing dancing till
28 tomorrow gives up with a shout,
29 'cause there is only

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30 Saturday night, and we are in it---
31 black as black can,
32 black as black does,
33 not a concept
34 nor a percentage

35 but a natural law.

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Dove, Rita : The Musician Talks about "Process" [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

(after Anthony "Spoons" Pough)

1 I learned the spoons from
2 my grandfather, who was blind.
3 Every day he'd go into the woods
4 'cause that was his thing.
5 He met all kinds of creatures,
6 birds and squirrels,
7 and while he was feeding them
8 he'd play the spoons,
9 and after they finished
10 they'd stay and listen.

11 When I go into Philly
12 on a Saturday night,
13 I don't need nothing but
14 my spoons and the music.
15 Laid out on my knees
16 they look so quiet,
17 but when I pick them up
18 I can play to anything:
19 a dripping faucet,
20 a tambourine,
21 fish shining in a creek.

22 A funny thing:
23 When my grandfather died,
24 every creature sang.
25 And when the men went out

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26 to get him, they kept singing.
27 They sung for two days,

28 all the birds, all the animals.
29 That's when I left the South.

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Dove, Rita : Sunday [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Their father was a hunting man.
2 Each spring the Easter rabbit sprung open
3 above the bathroom sink, drip slowed
4 by the split pink pods of its ears
5 to an intravenous trickle.
6 There was the occasional deer,
7 though he had no particular taste
8 for venison---too stringy, he said,
9 but made Mother smoke it up just in case,
10 all four haunches and the ribs.

11 Summer always ended with a catfish
12 large as a grown man's thigh
13 severed at the hip, thrashing
14 in a tin washtub: a mean fish, a fish
15 who knew the world was to be endured
16 between mud and the shining hook.

17 He avoided easy quarry: possum
18 and squirrel, complacent carp.
19 He wouldn't be caught dead
20 bagging coon; coon, he said,
21 was fickle meat---tasted like
22 chicken one night, the next like
23 poor man's lobster. He'd never admit
24 being reduced to eating coon,
25 to be called out of his name
26 and into that cartoon.

27 It's not surprising they could eat the mess
28 he made of their playground: They watched
29 the October hog gutted with grim fury,

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30 a kind of love gone wrong, but oh
31 they adored each whiskery hock, each
32 ham slice brushed subterranean green.

33 They were eating his misery
34 like bad medicine meant to help them
35 grow. They would have done anything
36 not to see his hand jerk like that,
37 his belt hissing through the loops and around
38 that fist working inside the coils
39 like an animal gnawing, an animal
40 who knows freedom's worth anything
41 you need to leave behind to get to it---
42 even your own flesh and blood.

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**Dove, Rita : The Camel Comes to Us
from the Barbarians [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]**

2

1 This one is enormous: rough-cut,
2 the fur like matted felt---
3 and so much of it,

4 rising in vulgar mounds upon its back
5 as if the sand itself had belched
6 into heaven's beard. Gods,

7 what malevolence! The eye a constant
8 rolling orb, glistening with ill intent,
9 yellowed, gummed with hair, more hairs

10 than you or I would care to count,
11 that eye marks every move its jailer makes
12 and waits for him to step too near---

13 one blow would cripple any man.

14 Another specimen stands bellowing
15 beneath the farthest palm. Though slighter,

16 it daunts equally, staked haunches
17 straining, muscles potent as the reek
18 that saturates our sun-baked marketplace.

19 About the larger one some purpose lurks:
20 Hindquarters splayed, it tugs against its ropes,
21 snorts, yearns its massive head and slavers

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22 toward that godawful sound. Could
23 the drabber one be female, and its mate?
24 More monsters in our midst!

25 And yet ...if these vile creatures be
26 like geese, or dogs, and their offspring
27 learn to cuddle the one

28 who coddles them first---why,
29 our fortune's pegged for sure.
30 Let us display our sternest countenance,

31 then apportion what they most desire
32 according to the measure of their service.
33 A rare commodity, these beasts---

34 who cannot know
35 what beauty wreaks, what mountains
36 pity moves.

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Dove, Rita : The Venus of Willendorf [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

*Let your eye be a candle in a chamber ,
your gaze a knife ;
let me be blind enough
to ignite it .*

---PAUL CELAN

1 She kneels on a workbench
2 strewn with clipper and trowel
3 to look out over the valley, red sun
4 still snagged on the farthest green fringe.
5 She's early. Behind her
6 scratch the arbor's last leaves
7 and a few gray birds pecking for crumbs
8 among the rose husks fallen to the veranda.

9 Arrived a week ago, one more exotic
10 in the stream of foreign students
11 invited to *Herr Professor* 's summer house
12 in the Wachau, she was taken
13 straight from train to tavern
14 to see the village miracle, unearthed
15 not five kilometers from this garden shed:

16 the legendary Venus of Willendorf.
17 Just a replica, *natürlich* ,
18 a handful of primitive stone
19 entombed in a glass display
20 the innkeeper kept dusting as he told
21 his one story, charmed by the sight of
22 a live black girl. *Not five kilometers!*
23 he repeated, stopping his cloth

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24 to reexamine the evidence:
25 sprawling buttocks and barbarous thighs,
26 breasts heaped up in her arms
27 to keep from spilling.
28 *We should have kept her* , he said.
29 *Made the world come to us*
30 *here, in Austria* .

31 "Here" seemed
32 hardly Austrian, although the Danube
33 had wandered through, scooped out a gorge
34 and left it clotted with poppies to dream
35 the haze of centuries away. Each morning
36 she heard children tumbling down the path
37 to catch the 7:10 on its milk run
38 to the school in Krems. Each evening
39 the Munich-Vienna express barreled through
40 at precisely---another miracle---
41 7:10.
42 It was impossible, of course,
43 to walk the one asphalted street
44 without enduring a gauntlet of stares.
45 *Have you seen her?* they asked,
46 comparing her to their Venus
47 until she could feel her own breasts
48 settle and the ripening
49 predicament of hip and thigh.

50 They were on the veranda
51 when he confessed---no, "confided"
52 (wife occupied in the kitchen, slicing cake)
53 that his pubic hair had gone white.
54 She should have been shocked
55 but couldn't deny the thrill
56 it gave her, how her body felt

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57 tender and fierce, all at once.
58 What made one sculpture so luscious
59 when there were real women, layered
60 in flesh no one worshipped?
61 The professor's wife, for instance,
62 hair too long and charred eyes
63 wild in their sockets as if to say
64 *Where thou goest, there I went also* ---
65 no one devoured her with his glance as she
66 cleared away the tea things.

67 In Willendorf
68 twilight is brutal: no dim tottering
69 across flowery fields but blindness

70 dropped into the treeline like an ax.
71 *He won't dare touch me ,*
72 *she argues, and risk destroying*
73 *everything .* Yet his gaze, glutting itself
74 until her contours blazed ...
75 and suddenly she understands what made
76 the Venus beautiful
77 was how the carver's hand had loved her,
78 that visible caress.

79 Lightning
80 then a faint, agreeable thunder
81 as the express glides past below,
82 passengers snared in light, smudged flecks
83 floating in a string of golden cells.
84 *If only we were ghosts ,* she thinks,
85 leaning into the rising hush,

86 *if only I could wait forever .*

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Dove, Rita : Incarnation in Phoenix [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Into this paradise of pain she strides
2 on the slim tether of a nurse's bell,
3 her charcoal limbs emerging from crisp whites
4 unlikely as an envelope issuing smoke.
5 I've rung because my breasts have risen,
6 artesian: I'm not ready for this motherhood stuff.

7 Her name is Raven. And she swoops
8 across the tiled wilderness, hair boiling
9 thunder over the rampart of bobby pins
10 spoking her immaculate cap. She dips once
11 for the baby just waking, fists punching
12 in for work "right on schedule"---
13 bends again to investigate what
14 should be natural, milk sighing into
15 one tiny, vociferous mouth. "Ah,"

16 she whispers, "ambrosia,"

17 shaming me instantly. But
18 no nectar trickles forth, no manna
19 descends from the vault of heaven
20 to feed this pearly syllable, this
21 package of leafy persuasion
22 dropped on our doorstep and ripening
23 before us, a miniature United Nations
24 "Just like me!" Raven says, citing

25 the name of her mother's village
26 somewhere in Norway, her father
27 a buffalo soldier. Now,
28 of course, we can place her:

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29 an African Valkyrie
30 who takes my breast in her fists
31 grunting, "This hurts you more
32 than it does me"---then my laugh
33 squeezed to a whimper and the milk running out.

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Revenant [By Dove, R., 1952-]

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**Dove, Rita : Best Western Motor Lodge,
AAA Approved [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]**

1 Where can I find Moon Avenue,
2 just off Princess Lane? I wandered
3 the length of the Boulevard of the Spirits,

4 squandered a wad on Copper Queen Drive;

5 stood for a while at the public drinking fountain,
6 where a dog curled into his own hair
7 and a boy knelt, cursing his dirtied
8 tennis shoes. I tell you, if you feel strange,

9 strange things will happen to you:
10 Fallen peacocks on the library shelves
11 and all those maple trees, plastering
12 the sidewalks with leaves,

13 bloody palm prints everywhere.

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Dove, Rita : Revenant [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Palomino, horse of shadows.
2 Pale of the gyrfalcon
3 streaking free,
4 a reckoning---

5 the dark climbing out a crack in the earth.

6 Black veils starched for Easter.
7 The black hood of the condemned,
8 reeking with slobber.
9 The no color behind the eyelid
10 as the ax drops.

11 Gauze bandages over the wounds of State.

12 The canvas is primed, the morning
13 bitten off but too much to chew.
14 No angels here:
15 The last one slipped the room

16 while your head was turned,
17 made off for the winter streets.

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Dove, Rita : On Veronica [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

*" I sat in front of the mirror, covered it over with
plastic and copied on it the outlines of my face ."*

---EWA KURYLUK, *JOURNEY TO THE FRONTIERS OF ART*

1 Exposed to light,
2 the shroud lifts
3 its miraculous inscription---

4 a wound. Skin talking:
5 *yes there, touch me there .*
6 The stain of a glance,

7 a glance caught off-
8 guard, how it slices,
9 how each mirror imperils!

10 Or the acid sweat of sex,
11 cool ache of a breeze ...
12 a hassock, stars.

13 Heaven encoded in the blue
14 volume of an arch
15 imploding,

16 shadows burned into doorways
17 at the zero point.
18 Dots and dashes.

19 The beloved's face
20 captured, rising from zero
21 onto the glistening plate---

22 white room, white sky.

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Dove, Rita : There Came a Soul [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

3
After IVAN ALBRIGHT'S Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida

1 She arrived as near to virginal
2 as girls got in those days---i.e., young,
3 the requisite dewy cheek
4 flushed at its own daring.
5 He had hoped for a little more edge.
6 But she held the newspaper rolled like a scepter,
7 his advertisement turned up to prove
8 she was there solely at his bidding---and yet
9 the gold band, the photographs ...a mother, then.

10 He placed her in the old garden chair,
11 the same one he went to evenings
12 when the first tug on the cord sent the bulb
13 swinging like the lamps in the medic's tent
14 over the wounded, swaddled shapes that moaned
15 each time the Screaming Meemies let loose,
16 their calculated shrieks so far away
17 he thought of crickets---while all around him
18 matted gauze and ether pricked up
19 an itch so bad he could hardly sketch
20 each clean curve of tissue opening.
21 *I shut my eyes, walk straight to it .*
22 *Nothing special but it's there, wicker*
23 *fraying under my calming fingers .*

24 What if he changed the newspaper into a letter,

25 then ripped it up and tucked the best part

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26 from view? How much he needed that desecrated
27 scrap! And the red comb snarled with a few
28 pale hairs for God in his infinite greed
29 to snatch upon like a hawk targeting a sparrow---
30 he couldn't say *At least I let you keep your hair*
31 so he kept to his task, applying paint
32 like a bandage to the open wound.

33 Pretty Ida, out to earn a penny
34 for her tiny brood.
35 He didn't mask the full lips
36 or the way all the niggling fears
37 of an adolescent century
38 shone through her hesitant eyes,
39 but he painted the room out, blackened
40 every casement, every canvas drying
41 along the wall, even the ailing coffeepot
42 whose dim brew she politely refused,
43 until she was seated
44 as he had been, dropped
45 bleak and thick,
46 onto the last chair in the world.

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Dove, Rita : The Peach Orchard [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

What the soul needs, it uses .

---JAMES HILLMAN

1 I say there is no memory of him
2 staining my palms and my mouth.
3 I walk about, no longer human---
4 something shameful, something
5 that can't move at all.

6 Women invented misery,
7 but we don't understand it.
8 We hold it close and tell it
9 everything, cradle the ache
10 until it seeps in and he's

11 gone, just like the wind
12 when the air stands still.
13 I'll step lightly
14 along the path between
15 the blossoming trees,

16 lightly over petals
17 drifting speechless and pale.
18 No other story could have
19 brought me here: this
20 stone floor. And branches,

21 bank upon bank of them brimming
22 like a righteous mob, like
23 a ventriloquist humming,

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24 his hand up
25 my spine ...O these

26 trees, shedding all
27 over themselves.
28 Only a fool
29 would think such frenzy
30 beautiful.

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Dove, Rita : Against Repose [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

(Balcony, Berlin , 1981)

1 Nothing comes to mind.

2 I place my arm on my knee
3 and a small ache shimmers
4 in the elbow. Gristle
5 perhaps, or the nub of a nerve.
6 Who knows? Don't think;
7 lean into the wrought iron
8 until the table quakes, sends the wine aquiver.

9 Nothing happens.
10 Red homunculus settling,
11 green--- *Libelle?* cicada?---drifting by
12 as a breeze rouses the linden,
13 lifts a millimeter of leaf
14 all the way down the boulevard.
15 This elbow's no good. I'd rather be

16 anywhere---and if I dare blink
17 or belch, or scratch at my furrowed unease;
18 if I refuse to look up, into God's
19 bland countenance ...
20 the lost wing would still itch
21 and the wine stay bitter
22 in the glass---a mouthful of sin

23 in an inchful of hell.

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Dove, Rita : Against Self-Pity [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 It gets you nowhere but deeper into
2 your own shit---pure misery a luxury
3 one never learns to enjoy. There's always some

4 meatier malaise, a misalliance ripe

5 to burst: Soften the mouth to a smile and
6 it stutters; laugh, and your drink spills onto the wake

7 of repartee gone cold. Oh, you know
8 all the right things to say to yourself: Seize
9 the day, keep the faith, remember the children

10 starving in India ...the same stuff
11 you say to your daughter
12 whenever a poked-out lip betrays

13 a less than noble constitution. (Not that
14 you'd consider actually *going* to India---all
15 those diseases and fervent eyes.) But if it's

16 not your collapsing line of credit, it's
17 the scream you let rip when a centipede
18 shrieks up the patio wall. And that

19 daughter? She'll find a reason to laugh
20 at you, her dear mother: *Poor thing*
21 *wouldn't harm a soul!* she'll say, as if

22 she knew of such things---
23 innocence, and a soul smart enough to know
24 when to get out of the way.

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**Dove, Rita : Götterdämmerung [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company
]**

1 A straw reed climbs the car antenna.

2 Beyond the tinted glass, golden waves
3 of grain. *Golly!* I can't help
4 exclaiming, and he smirks---

5 my born-again naturalist son
6 with his souped-up laptop,
7 dear prodigy who insists
8 on driving the two hours
9 to the jet he insists I take.
10 (No turboprops for this

11 old lady.) On good days
12 I feel a little meaty; on bad,
13 a few degrees from rancid.
14 (Damn knee: I used it this morning
15 to retrieve a spilled colander;
16 now every cell's blowing whistles.)

17 At least it's still a body.
18 He'd never believe it, son of mine,
19 but I remember what it's like
20 to walk the world
21 with no help from strangers,
22 not even a personal trainer
23 to make you feel the burn.

24 (Most of the time, it's flutter-heart
25 and Her Royal Celestial Mustache.
26 Most of the time I'm broth
27 instead of honey in the bag.)

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28 So I wear cosmetics maliciously
29 now. And I like my bracelets,
30 even though they sound ridiculous,
31 clinking as I skulk through the mall,
32 store to store like some ancient
33 iron-clawed griffin---but I've never

34 stopped wanting to cross
35 the equator, or touch an elk's
36 horns, or sing *Tosca* or screw
37 James Dean in a field of wheat.
38 To hell with wisdom. They're all wrong:
39 I'll never be through with my life.

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Dove, Rita : Ghost Walk [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

Château de Lavigny
August 1996

1 The neighbors who never
2 set foot in the castle
3 never tasted the truffles or château rosé
4 say she walks room to room
5 all night turning the lights on
6 and by day a cold wind blows
7 through the tiered gardens
8 pinching leaves from the withering rose

9 It is said in the village
10 she died of pure heartbreak
11 not a love turned away
12 but a love lasting only
13 as long as a lifetime
14 his life and no longer
15 not enough for the lady
16 hair red as a brushfire

17 that refused to go out
18 though it faded with years
19 to the orange of the coral
20 that lives in the sea
21 and still she was lovely
22 pale beauty became her
23 like pearls or a music box
24 like *Kaffee mit Schlag*

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25 slim in an era when slim wasn't in fashion
26 she climbed into her tub
27 lined with bath salts and mirrors
28 chin-deep in scent

29 she would dream of a body
30 that could hold all of her
31 keep her afloat on this ocean
32 of good sense and breeding

33 she told no one not even
34 the one man she lived for
35 she put on her lipstick
36 she combed her brave hair
37 which she bore like a lantern
38 into the murmuring parlor
39 where they waited with smiles
40 and champagne on their lips

41 all night the waves pitching
42 all day the crows wheeling
43 through skies blue as his eyes
44 bright above the stunned lake
45 when he died she lay down
46 in their bed of silk tassels
47 in their bed of fringed curtains
48 and rose-colored satin

49 she lay down without tears
50 in that blushing cradle
51 and slept in that rocking
52 that cargo of sighs
53 each night the bed creaking
54 cast onto the waves
55 each dawn roses flaunting
56 their loose tongues of flame

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57 she's a kind spirit
58 they assure us
59 down in the village
60 poor soul left behind
61 when the party was over
62 searching the rooms
63 for his laughter
64 and a last glass of wine

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Dove, Rita : Lady Freedom Among Us [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 don't lower your eyes
2 or stare straight ahead to where
3 you think you ought to be going

4 don't mutter *oh no*
5 *not another one*
6 *get a job fly a kite*
7 *go bury a bone*

8 with her oldfashioned sandals
9 with her leaden skirts
10 with her stained cheeks and whiskers and heaped up trinkets
11 she has risen among us in blunt reproach

12 she has fitted her hair under a hand-me-down cap
13 and spruced it up with feathers and stars
14 slung over one shoulder she bears
15 the rainbowed layers of charity and murmurs
16 *all of you even the least of you*

17 don't cross to the other side of the square
18 don't think *another item to fit on a tourist's agenda*

19 consider her drenched gaze her shining brow
20 she who has brought mercy back into the streets
21 and will not retire politely to the potter's field

22 having assumed the thick skin of this town
23 its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear
24 she rests in her weathered plumage
25 bigboned resolute

26 don't think you can ever forget her
27 don't even try
28 she's not going to budge

29 no choice but to grant her space
30 crown her with sky
31 for she is one of the many
32 and she is each of us

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**Dove, Rita : For Sophie, Who'll Be
in First Grade in the Year 2000 [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company
]**

1 No bright toy
2 this world we've left you.
3 Even the wrapping
4 is torn, the ribbons
5 grease-flecked and askew.
6 Still, it's all we have.

7 Wait a moment before
8 you pick it up. Study
9 its scratches, how it
10 shines in places. Now
11 love what you touch,
12 and you will touch wisely.

13 May the world, in your hands,
14 brighten with use. May you
15 sleep in sweet breath and
16 rise always in wonder
17 to mountain and forest,
18 green gaze and silk cheek---

19 dear Sophie,
20 littlest phoenix.

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On the Bus with Rosa Parks [By Dove, R., 1952-]

4

*All history is a negotiation
between familiarity and
strangeness.*

---SIMON SCHAMA

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Dove, Rita : Sit Back, Relax [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Lord, Lord. No rest
2 for the wicked?
3 Most likely no
4 heating pads.

5 (*Heat some gravy for the potatoes,*
6 *slice a little green pepper*
7 *into the pinto beans ...)*

8 Sometimes a body
9 just plain grieves.

10 *Stand by me in this, my hour ---*

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Dove, Rita : "The situation is intolerable" [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 *Intolerable*: that civilized word.
2 Aren't we civilized, too? Shoes shined,
3 each starched cuff unyielding,
4 each dovegray pleated trouser leg
5 a righteous sword advancing
6 onto the field of battle
7 in the name of the Lord ...

8 Hush, now. Assay
9 the terrain: all around us dark
10 and the perimeter in flames,
11 but the stars---
12 tiny, missionary stars---
13 on high, serene, studding
14 the inky brow of heaven.

15 So what if we were born up a creek
16 and knocked flat with the paddle,
17 if we ain't got a pot to piss in
18 and nowhere to put it if we did?
19 Our situation is intolerable, but what's worse
20 is to sit here and do nothing.
21 O yes. O mercy on our souls.

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Dove, Rita : Freedom Ride [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 As if, after High Street
2 and the left turn onto Exchange,
3 the view would veer onto
4 someplace fresh: Curaçao,
5 or a mosque adrift on a milk-fed pond.
6 But there's just more cloud cover,
7 and germy air

8 condensing on the tinted glass,
9 and the little houses with
10 their fearful patches of yard
11 rushing into the flames.

12 Pull the cord a stop too soon, and
13 you'll find yourself walking
14 a gauntlet of stares.
15 Daydream, and you'll wake up
16 in the stale dark of a cinema,
17 Dallas playing its mistake over and over
18 until even that sad reel won't stay
19 stuck---there's still
20 Bobby and Malcolm and Memphis,
21 at every corner the same
22 scorched brick, darkened windows.

23 Make no mistake: There's fire
24 back where you came from, too.
25 Pick any stop: You can ride
26 into the afternoon singing with strangers,
27 or rush home to the scotch
28 you've been pouring all day---
29 but where you sit is where you'll be
30 when the fire hits.

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Dove, Rita : Climbing In [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Teeth.
2 Metallic. Lie-gapped.
3 Not a friendly shine

4 like the dime
5 cutting my palm
6 as I clutch the silver pole
7 to step up, up

8 (sweat gilding the dear lady's

9 cheek)---these are big teeth,
10 teeth of the wolf

11 under Grandmother's cap.
12 Not quite a grin.
13 Pay him to keep smiling

14 as the bright lady tumbles
15 head over tail
16 down the clinking gullet.

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Dove, Rita : Claudette Colvin Goes to Work [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

5

*Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail
because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus and
give it to a white person. This is the second time since the
Claudette Colbert [sic] case This must be stopped .*

---BOYCOTT FLIER, DECEMBER 5, 1955

1 Menial twilight sweeps the storefronts along Lexington
2 as the shadows arrive to take their places
3 among the scourge of the earth. Here and there
4 a fickle brilliance---lightbulbs coming on
5 in each narrow residence, the golden wattage
6 of bleak interiors announcing *Anyone home?*
7 or *I'm beat, bring me a beer .*

8 Mostly I say to myself *Still here .* Lay
9 my keys on the table, pack the perishables away
10 before flipping the switch. I like the sugary
11 look of things in bad light---one drop of sweat
12 is all it would take to dissolve an armchair pillow
13 into brocade residue. Sometimes I wait until
14 it's dark enough for my body to disappear;

15 then I know it's time to start out for work.
16 Along the Avenue, the cabs start up, heading
17 toward midtown; neon stutters into ecstasy
18 as the male integers light up their smokes and let loose
19 a stream of brave talk: "Hey Mama" souring quickly to
20 "Your Mama" when there's no answer---as if
21 the most injury they can do is insult the reason

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22 you're here at all, walking in your whites
23 down to the stop so you can make a living.
24 *So ugly, so fat, so dumb, so greasy ---*
25 What do we have to do to make God love us?
26 Mama was a maid; my daddy mowed lawns like a boy,
27 and I'm the crazy girl off the bus, the one
28 who wrote in class she was going to be President.

29 I take the Number 6 bus to the Lex Ave train
30 and then I'm there all night, adjusting the sheets,
31 emptying the pans. And I don't curse or spit
32 or kick and scratch like they say I did then.
33 I help those who can't help themselves,
34 I do what needs to be done ... and I sleep
35 whenever sleep comes down on me.

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Dove, Rita : The Enactment [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

*"I'm just a girl who people were mean to
on a bus.... I could have been anybody."*

---MARY WARE, NÉE SMITH

1 Can't use no teenager, especially
2 no poor black trash,

3 no matter what her parents do
4 to keep up a living. Can't use
5 anyone without sense enough
6 to bite their tongue.

7 It's gotta be a woman,
8 someone of standing:
9 preferably shy, preferably married.
10 And she's got to know
11 when the moment's right.
12 Stay polite, though her shoulder's
13 aching, bus driver
14 the same one threw her off
15 twelve years before.

16 Then all she's got to do is
17 sit there, quiet, till
18 the next moment finds her---and only then
19 can she open her mouth to ask
20 *Why do you push us around?*
21 and his answer: *I don't know but*
22 *the law is the law and you*

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23 *are under arrest* .
24 She must sit there, and not smile
25 as they enter to carry her off;
26 she must know who to call
27 who will know whom else to call
28 to bail her out ... and only then

29 can she stand up and exhale,
30 can she walk out the cell
31 and down the jail steps
32 into flashbulbs and
33 her employer's white
34 arms---and go home,
35 and sit down in the seat
36 we have prepared for her.

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Dove, Rita : Rosa [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 How she sat there,
2 the time right inside a place
3 so wrong it was ready.

4 That trim name with
5 its dream of a bench
6 to rest on. Her sensible coat.

7 Doing nothing was the doing:
8 the clean flame of her gaze
9 carved by a camera flash.

10 How she stood up
11 when they bent down to retrieve
12 her purse. That courtesy.

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Dove, Rita : QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day. [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 Panel of gray silk. Liquefied ashes. Dingy percale tugged over
2 the vast dim earth---ill-fitting, softened by eons of tossing
3 and turning, unfurling its excesses, recalling its losses,
4 no seam for the mending, no selvage to catch and align
5 from where I sit and look out from this rose-colored armchair
6 along the gallery. I can hear the chime of the elevator,

7 the hush of trod carpet. Beyond the alcove, escorted widows
8 perfect a slow rumba. Couples linger by the cocktail piano,
9 enmeshed in their own delight as others stroll past,
10 pause to remark on the weather. Mist, calm seas.
11 This is a journey for those who simply wish to be

12 *on the way* ---to lie back and be rocked for a while, dangled

13 between the silver spoon and golden gate. Even
14 I'm thrilled, who never learned to wait on a corner,
15 hunched in bad weather, or how many coins to send
16 clicking into the glass bowl. I can only imagine
17 what it's like to climb the steel stairs and sit down, to feel
18 the weight of yourself sink into the moment of *going home* .

19 This is not the exalted fluorescence of the midnight route,
20 exhaustion sweetening the stops. There's
21 no money here, just chips and signatures,
22 no neat dime or tarnished token, no exact change.
23 Here I float on the lap of existence. Each night
24 I put this body into its sleeve of dark water with no more

25 than a teardrop of ecstasy, a thimbleful of ache.
26 And that, friends, is the difference---

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27 I can't erase an ache I never had.
28 Not even my own grandmother would pity me;
29 instead she'd suck her teeth at the sorry sight
30 of some Negro actually looking for misery.

31 Well. I'd go home if I knew where to get off.

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**Dove, Rita : In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre,
Washington, D.C. [from On The Bus With Rosa Parks (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]**

1 They'd positioned her---two attendants flanking the wheelchair---
2 at the foot of the golden escalator, just right
3 of the movie director who had cajoled her to come.
4 Elegant in a high-strung way, a-twitch in his tux,
5 he shoved half spectacles up the nonexistent
6 bridge of his nose. Not that he was using her

7 to push his film, but it was only right (wasn't it?)
8 that she be wherever history was being made---after all,

9 she was the true inspiration, she was *living* history.
10 The audience descended in a cavalcade of murmuring
11 sequins. She waited. She knew how to abide,
12 to sit in cool contemplation of the expected.
13 She had learned to travel a crowd
14 bearing a smile we weren't sure we could bear
15 to receive, it was so calm a suturing.
16 Scrolling earthward, buffed bronze

17 in the reflected glow, we couldn't wait but leaned out
18 to catch a glimpse, and saw
19 that the smile was not practiced at all---
20 real delight bloomed there. She was curious;
21 she suffered our approach (the gush and coo,
22 the babbling, the director bending down
23 to meet the camera flash) until someone
24 tried to touch her, and then the attendants

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25 pushed us back, gently. She nodded,
26 lifted a hand as if to console us
27 before letting it drop, slowly, to her lap.
28 Resting there. The idea of consolation
29 soothing us: her gesture
30 already become her touch,
31 like the history she made for us sitting there,
32 waiting for the moment to take her.

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Dove, Rita : The Pond, Porch-View:

Six P.M., Early Spring [from *On The Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999) , W. W. Norton & Company]

1 I sit, and sit, and will my thoughts
2 the way they used to wend
3 when thoughts were young

4 (i.e., accused of wandering).
 5 The sunset ticks another notch
 6 into the pressure treated rails
 7 of the veranda. My heart, too,
 8 has come down to earth;
 9 I've missed the chance
 10 to put things in reverse,
 11 recapture childhood's backseat
 12 universe. Where I'm at now
 13 is more like riding on a bus
 14 through unfamiliar neighborhoods---
 15 chair in recline, the view chopped square
 16 and dimming quick. I know
 17 I vowed I'd get off
 18 somewhere grand; like that dear goose
 19 come honking down
 20 from Canada, I tried to end up
 21 anyplace but here.
 22 Who am I kidding? Here I am.

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Acknowledgments

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Agni Review : "Cameos"; *American Poetry Review* : "Best Western Motor Lodge, AAA Approved"; *The American Scholar* : "Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967"; *Callaloo* : "Dawn Revisited"; *Chelsea* : "The Musician Talks about 'Process' "; *Doubletake* : "Parlor"; *The Georgia Review* : "On Veronica"; *The Gettysburg Review* : "Ghost Walk", and "The Camel Comes to Us from the Barbarians"; *International Quarterly* : "I Cut My Finger Once on Purpose"; *Meridian* : "The Peach Orchard"; *The New Yorker* : "Incarnation in Phoenix"; *Parnassus* : "Against Repose" and "Götterdämmerung"; *Poetry* : "For Sophie, Who'll Be in First Grade in the Year 2000," "Testimonial," and "The Venus of Willendorf"; *Poetry Review* (U.K.): "Singsong"; *The Progressive* : "Black on a Saturday Night"; *Slate* : "Against Self-Pity," Revenant," and "Sunday"; *USA Weekend* : "Freedom, Bird's-Eye View" and "My Mother Enters the Work Force."

The title sequence, "On the Bus with Rosa Parks," was first published as a special section in *The Georgia Review* , Winter 1998.

"Lady Freedom Among Us" was read by the author at the ceremony commemorating the 200th anniversary of the United States Capitol and the restoration of the Statue of Freedom to the Capitol dome on October 23, 1993, and first published in the *Congressional Record* of the same day. It was subsequently commissioned as the four millionth volume of the University of Virginia Libraries in a fine press edition by Janus Press, West Burke, Vermont, 1994, and at the same time made globally accessible by the University of Virginia in a multimedia version on the Internet. "Lady Freedom Among Us" also appeared in *The Poet's World* , a volume

of the author's poet laureate lectures at the Library of Congress (Library of Congress, 1995), and in several other publications.

"The First Book" appeared first in *The Language of Life*, ed. Bill Moyers, 1995. It is also available as an American Library Association poster and bookmark.

"There Came a Soul" appeared first in *Transforming Vision : Writers on Art*, ed. Edward Hirsch. The Art Institute of Chicago, 1994.

"Black on a Saturday Night" and "Singsong" (as "Song") are also part of *Seven for Luck*, a song cycle for soprano and orchestra, lyrics by Rita Dove, music by John

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Williams, and appeared in the program for the song cycle's world premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood July 25, 1998.

The epigraph to the title sequence is from Simon Schama's essay "Clio at the Multiplex," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1998.

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NOTES

^ [Note 1

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^ [End note 2

This allegorical poem was inspired by an Aesop fable entitled "The First Appearance of the Camel"; it relates how man's terror of this strange and powerful creature gradually turns to contempt once the means to control and domesticate the animal were discovered.

^ [End note 3

Ivan Albright (1897-1983) began his painting of Ida Rogers in 1929. Although the model was a twenty-year-old wife and mother, the Chicago artist decided to portray her as a lonely old woman. Art scholars cite Albright's experience as a medical illustrator during World War I as a possible motive for his later preoccupation with old age.

^ [End note 4

In 1995, during a convention in Williamsburg, Virginia, as the conferees were boarding buses to be driven to another site, my daughter leaned over and whispered, "Hey, we're on the bus with Rosa Parks!" Although the

precipitating incident did not make it into a poem, the phrase haunted me---and so this meditation on history and the individual, image and essence was born. (By the way, Mrs. Parks took a seat in the front of the bus.)

^ [End note 5

Before Rosa Parks's historic refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, several other women had been arrested for violating that city's public transportation segregation laws. On March 2 of the same year, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to yield her seat to white high school students. And on October 21, Mary Louise Smith was on her way home from a bad day when she was roused from daydreaming by an irate white passenger; she, too, did not vacate her seat voluntarily.

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