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Rita Dove: 03-06-1985

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DOVE: "Parsley.

'1. The Cane Fields

There is a parrot imitating spring
in the palace, its feathers parsley green.
Out of the swamp the cane appears

to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General
searches for a word; he is all the world
there is. Like a parrot imitating spring,

we lie down screaming as rain punches through
and we come up green. We cannot speak an R—
out of the swamp, the cane appears

and then the mountain we call in whispers *Katalina*.
The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.
There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: *perejil*.
Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining
out of the swamp. The cane appears

in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.
And we lie down. For every drop of blood
there is a parrot imitating spring.
Out of the swamp the cane appears.

2. The Palace

The word the general's chosen is parsley.
It is fall, when thoughts turn
to love and death; the general thinks
of his mother, how she died in the fall
and he planted her walking cane at the grave
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming
four-star blossoms. The general

pulls on his boots, he stomps to
her room in the palace, the one without
curtains, the one with a parrot
in a brass ring. As he paces he wonders
Who can I kill today. And for a moment
the little knot of screams
is still. The parrot, who has traveled

all the way from Australia in an ivory
cage, is, coy as a widow, practising

spring. Ever since the morning
his mother collapsed in the kitchen
while baking skull-shaped candies
for the Day of the Dead, the general
has hated sweets. He orders pastries
brought up for the bird; they arrive

dusted with sugar on a bed of lace.
The knot in his throat starts to twitch;
he sees his boots the first day of battle
splashed with mud and urine
as a soldier falls at his feet amazed—
how stupid he looked!— at the sound
of artillery. *I never thought it would sing*
the soldier said, and died. Now

the general sees the fields of sugar
cane, lashed by rain and streaming.
He sees his mother's smile, the teeth
gnawed to arrowheads. He hears
the Haitians sing without R's
as they swing the great machetes:
Katalina, they sing, Katalina,

mi madle, mi amol en muelte. God knows
his mother was no stupid woman; she
could roll an R like a queen. Even
a parrot can roll an R! In the bare room
the bright feathers arch in a parody
of greenery, as the last pale crumbs
disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone

calls out his name in a voice
so like his mother's, a startled tear
splashes the tip of his right boot.
My mother, my love in death.

The general remembers the tiny green sprigs
men of his village wore in their capes
to honor the birth of a son. He will
order many, this time, to be killed
for a single, beautiful word.”

[Music]

ANNOUNCER: "Brockport Writers Forum, in its exclusive and continuing series of discussion with leading literary contemporaries, presents the poetry of Rita Dove. Now, for the Writers Forum, here is Stan Sanvel Rubin, director."

RUBIN: "Thank you. Welcome to the Writers Forum. Our guest today, Rita Dove, was born in Akron, Ohio and is a graduate of Miami University and University of Iowa Writers Workshop. She spent several years in Europe and now teaches at Arizona State University. She has been the recipient of a Fullbright-Hayes scholarship, a grant for the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her books, *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Museum* were published in 1980 and 1983 respectively by Carnegie-Mellon University Press, who will also be publishing her forthcoming collection, *Thomas and Buelah*. Welcome, Rita."

DOVE: "Thank you."

RUBIN: "Speaking with us today is Judith Kitchen, poet and editor/publisher of State Street Press. Rita, I'd like to begin by going back to that long, powerful poem, 'Parsley' which you just read. The poem is based on a real incident concerning the Dominican dictator Trujillo, isn't it?"

DOVE: "Yes, that's right. What happened, in 1957 Trujillo had ordered 20,000 black Haitians to be killed because they couldn't roll their R's. And he chose the Spanish word for parsley in order to test this. It was an act of arbitrary cruelty, but it fascinated me not only for its political implications, but the way language enters into history at that point, you know. That there's a word that determines whether you live or die."

RUBIN: "You say they died for the sake of a single beautiful word. You really believe the word creates history, that kind of tragic sweep?"

DOVE: "Well, in a certain sense. I mean, in this case certainly the word and the ability to pronounce it or not was something that created history. But also history is the way we perceive it. And we do perceive it through words in the way it is presented to us in books. And language does shape our perceptions. So I wouldn't go so far as to say that history is language or anything like that. But the way we perceive things is of course circumscribed by our ability to express those things."

RUBIN: "There's a lot of things in that poem that I think are expressive of your work generally. And one of them is the tradeoff between fact and imagination. And it's based on this historical incident, but you get as imaginative as a novelist if I might say so. I mean, you have Trujillo's mother died backing skull-shaped cookies on the Day of the Dead."

DOVE: "Yeah."

RUBIN: "Is this in fact part of your research?"

DOVE: "No, it isn't. In fact, the only thing in that poem which is a product of research is the actual fact that he did have this happen, that the Haitians worked in the cane fields. And that in fact when someone could not roll an R, it usually comes out as an L. Hence you get Katalina instead of Katarina. And the rest of that -- what goes through Trujillo's mind as he tries to you know, find a way to kill someone, is my own imagination. It fascinated me that this man would think of such an imaginative way to kill someone, to kill lots of people. That in fact he must have gotten some kind of perverse joy out of finding a way to do it. You know, the sense of torture, you know, you speak your own death sentence."

RUBIN: "It's nice that you create him as a character, to his flashback back to his mother's death, his memories of the battlefield before battle. And the knot in his own throat. It becomes totally alive with the past, even with a sense of the psychopathology, why he did this. I mean, coming back to the mother, it's a fascinating way of working. Do you find your imagination compelled by historical events, by fact, very frequently?"

DOVE: "I do. Especially in Museum. Because when I started Museum I was in Europe. And by being in Europe, living in Europe for a while, I had a way of looking back on America and kind of distancing myself from my experience and looking at history and looking at the world in a different way, because I was in another set, another mindset. So I found historical events fascinating for looking underneath them, not what we always see, or not what is always said about a historical event. But about you know, the things that can't be related in the dry historical sense."

KITCHEN: "Let's look at the way in which the poem unfolds a little bit even."

DOVE: "Okay."

KITCHEN: "And could you comment on the lyric moments of the poem and the formal aspects of the poem, the repetitions?"

DOVE: "Okay, well that poem was -- oh, it took a long time to write that thing. I started out, I had the facts, and that in a certain way almost inhibited me. The very action, the fact that he thought of this word was already so amazing that I had a hard time trying to figure out how to deal with it. So when I wrote the poem, I tried it many different ways. I tried a sestina, because particularly in the second part, The Palace, simply because the obsessiveness of sestina, the repeated words was something. I wanted to get that driven quality in the poem. I gave up the sestina very early. It was leading me into rather you know -- too playful for the poem. But a lot of the words stayed, keywords like the parrot and spring and of course parsley and things like that stayed. The first part was a villanelle. I started that out as a villanelle. I didn't start it out in two parts either. It started out as one long poem. I tried it as a villanelle. I got a certain part. I thought I was only going to do it from the Haitian's point of view. And that wasn't enough. I had this villanelle and it wasn't enough. And there was a lot more that I hadn't said. So I tried the sestina, gave it up. But I think part of that driven quality still remains in that second part."

KITCHEN: "Well it doesn't seem accidental to me at least that every line seems to have two or three words with an R prominent in the English language. It seems "parody of greenery" is a good example of something you seem to be playing with throughout the poem. Was it to call our attention?"

DOVE: "I didn't think of it consciously, but I was very conscious of sound in the poem. And I didn't think to say I'm going to get you know, American R's and Spanish R's in it. But the R has kind of a growl to it even in English, a subdued growl to it I suppose in American English. That was essential to the sound cage of the poem, you know. So it's all there, yeah, I guess."

RUBIN: "You're aware of sound power as you write, very imaginative."

DOVE: "Yeah."

RUBIN: "The word "parrot" in the opening does that R move that Judy was talking about. So in a sense, when you keep repeating the parrot, it's always an acoustic image as much as it's a visual image, and a kind of symbol. Very interesting. Are you worried at all that you can create that Trujillo so fully that he's

even a monster as not beyond us, but in fact becomes human on some level with thoughts and memories?"

DOVE: "No, I'm not really afraid. I'm not quite sure what you mean by afraid. If I'm afraid of bringing that out in me, or afraid of making him too human. But either way, I believe all of us have inside the capacity for violence and cruelty. You see it even in children, and it's something we deal with. And we have to deal with it. If you ignore it, it's far too easy to be seduced into it I think later. And I frankly don't believe anyone who says you know, that they've never felt -- you know, like they don't have any evil in them, that they cannot understand that process of evil. It was important for me to try to understand that arbitrary quality of his cruelty. And I'm not afraid that I'm making him you know, too human, or that I don't believe that anybody's going to like him after this. But I don't want -- by making us get into his head, the way I'm hoping that it shocks us all, in terms of what the human being is capable of and what in fact we're capable of. Because if we can get into that, if we can go that far into his head, we're halfway there ourselves, you know."

KITCHEN: "That's the final poem of this second book, *Museum*. And it seems to encapsulate some of the other aspects of the book. But the book as a whole seems to deal with the same aspect of looking back, looking into something either historical or artistic. It becomes a museum. Could you talk about that a little bit?"

DOVE: "Sure. The book was... *Museum* was very carefully thought out in terms of a book, you know, and the impression it would make. And I suppose what I was trying to do in *Museum* was to deal with certain artifacts that we have in life, not the ordinary artifacts, the ones that you would expect to find in a museum per se. But anything that becomes frozen by memory, you know, or by circumstance, or by history. So that there are poems -- there are some things which in fact are ideal museum objects, the fish in the stone for instance or something, the fossil that we observe. But there are also people who become frozen or lifted out and set on a pedestal, maybe a mental pedestal like poems about Bocaccio's idealized love, Fiammetta. She becomes an object of admiration. There's a whole section of my father in a way that's the memory, the childhood focusing on a father and what he seemed like to me then. So I was concerned about doing that number one, in *Museum*. The other thing was to get the underside of the story, not to tell the big historical events, but in fact to point out, talk about things which no one will remember but which are as important in shaping our concept of ourselves and the world we live in as the biggie so to speak. So that's why the dedication to the book is for nobody who made us possible. And it's really for the Haitians and it's for you know, Fiammetta who is a nobody really because she's not treated real. Things like that."

KITCHEN: "Were you able to write this to some extent because you had at that point moved from this country into another country? That slight sense of displacement which seems to be underneath each of these poems, do you think it have bearing? And to what extent?"

DOVE: "I think it did. I think it really had a lot of bearing. One of the things is when I went to Europe the first time, and that was in '74 -- it was way before I had thought of this book. It was mind-boggling to see how blind I had been in my own little world of America and whatever that means. It never dawned on me that there was a world out there. It was really quite shocking to see that there was another way of looking at things. And when I went back in '80-81 to spend a lot of time, we got a different angle on the way things are. The way things happen in the world and the importance that they take. Also as a person, going to Europe I was treated differently. I was an American. People treated me differently because I

was American. I was black but they treated me differently than people treat me here because I'm black. And in fact I often felt a little like Fiammetta. I became an object. I was a black American and therefore I became a representative for all of that. And I sometimes felt like a ghost. I mean, people would ask me questions or treat me, but I had a feeling they weren't seeing me. It was some you know, shell. So that sense of being there and not being there, you know -- and then because you aren't there, you can see things a little clearer sometimes."

KITCHEN: "Right."

DOVE: "That certainly was something I think that informed the spirit of *Museum*, certainly."

RUBIN: "Because the book is, as you both said, so carefully structured, I wonder if I could just go back through it for subtitles, the four sections, and just have you say something characterizing from your own point of view each of these sections."

DOVE: "Yeah, okay."

RUBIN: "The first is 'The Hill has Something to Say'."

DOVE: "Well, 'The Hill has Something' -- in the first section -- that comes from a title of one of the poems in the first section. And on a very narrow level, I would say a very narrow way of looking at that title would be the thought that every hill contains things which made it a hill. I'm speaking specifically of Europe where practically every hill has ruins underneath it. So it has its history if we would just listen. If we could look at what is very obvious, a hill, and imagine the layers of time. There's an archaeological sense and magic that I was trying to get at in that title. But also I was trying to get at the inability of that hill to say anything too. It's an inarticulate object. We have to dig into it, which is why at the end of that section there are lots of characters, individuals from history who can't speak to us anymore. Like two saints, Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine of Sienna, and Bocaccio, Fiammetta. Or Tuan, you know, the Chinese. The unearthed Tuan and Lushan's bodies and all of their artifacts, but they can't speak to us anymore. We have to go through what they left behind and fashion it. So that really is the -- I guess what I can say about the Hill has Something to Say as a title."

RUBIN: "The second is 'In the Bulrush'."

DOVE: "'In the Bulrush'. I never really thought about this one. That too comes from a poem, In the Bulrush. And it has obvious religious you know connotations, Moses. But also the idea of becoming a chosen one from the weeds, you know. An unlikely space, place to be lifted out of and to make an impact. And so in that section there are -- but I play off it in many different ways. The first poem is called November for Beginners and it talks about waiting for rain, or that horrible weather in November to change. But that has more to do with the reedy quality of bulrushes than it does with being discovered. But then there are several people in that section who become objects for consideration, like Champion Jack Dupree, the blues singer who seems out of place in where he's at on stage, put on the spot, made a hero. Or Banneker, who was a black man in Baltimore who made the first almanac and went and fashioned, helped lay the grounds, survey the grounds for Washington DC. So that kind of thing is happening in that section. I was also trying to play off of -- I hate to give people what they expect. So often I try to play off in those titles, they would reflect back on the section before. I didn't want to put In the Bulrush -- I didn't want that to be the title for the first section because there were some poems that

dealt with saints and religion. I didn't want the obvious connection, right? So that's why 'In the Bulrush' you know, became the title for the second section."

RUBIN: "I wonder if I could ask you to read a poem I really love from that section, Delft."

DOVE: "Delft, okay."

RUBIN: "Which is just about just past midway in the section."

DOVE: "Okay. Delft.

'Flat, with variations. Not
the table but the cloth.
As if a continent
raging westward, staggered
at the sight of
so much water, sky
on curdling sky.

Wherever I walk
the earth's soft
mouth suckles.
These clumps of beaches,
glazed trunks
green with age.
Each brick house the original
oven, fired to stay
incipient mold,

while in the hour
of least resolve
the starched sheets
scratch the insomniac wife
to bravado. *At least,*
she whispers,

*we dine in style.
And our sceneries
please. We may be standing
on a porch
open to the world,
but the house behind us
is sinking."*

RUBIN: "Again, you imagine yourself into a scene as a character."

DOVE: "Mhmm."

RUBIN: "Did that come from being in Delft, or seeing a piece of Delft?"

DOVE: "It came from seeing a piece of Delft. I've never been in Delft. But I've been in the Netherlands and I know the incredible industry it takes to recover land and to live on that -- well we all live on that marshland, you know. And I was in Europe when I wrote that poem, so those two kind of came together."

RUBIN: "What about 'My Father's Telescope', the third part of the book?"

DOVE: "The third title. Well, the entire third section deals with my father. And it's also taken from a poem. But there are obviously sexual connotations in that title too, of 'My Father's Telescope'. But I was trying to look forward into the fourth section with the telescope so that it becomes the technological age, the scientific age, nuclear age. I'm looking forward to that. But also my father is someone that I had a hard time understanding. And so sometimes to me he seemed almost like a planet, very far away. And to draw him closer, you know, to try to bring him closer was also part of the sense of that title."

RUBIN: "You have a poem in there called Anti-Father."

DOVE: "Yeah. A lot of those poems were written, too, right at the time when the satellites were reporting all those wonderful photos of Saturn and Jupiter back and that was just incredible to see these pictures being painted, you know, line by line. So that also informed that whole section. And Anti-Father came right about that time too."

RUBIN: "Can I ask you to read that?"

DOVE: "Sure."

RUBIN: "That would be nice reading at this time."

DOVE: "I like that poem a lot. Anti-Father."

RUBIN: "Yeah. Page 54."

DOVE: "Okay. Anti-Father.

'Contrary to
tales you told us

summer nights when
the air conditioner

broke - the stars
are not far

apart. Rather
they draw

closer together
with years.

And houses
shrivel, un-lost,

and porches sag;
neighbors phone
to report cracks
in the cellar floor,
roots of the willow
coming up. Stars
speak to a child.
The past
is silent...
Just between
me and you,
woman to man,
outer space is
inconceivably
intimate.”

RUBIN: “That's lovely. I guess it says what you needed to say about the distance that you were describing. And finally you have the primer for ‘The Nuclear Age’, which has extended this theme to, as you said, to everything.”

DOVE: “Yeah. Looking outward again after going to the father. I also was trying very hard not to -- I didn't want the father poem to appear too early in the book. Again, I'm trying to keep people from thinking that they know what's coming. But after two sections where there's nothing personal at all to go through the father poems, and then to explode out of them to the nuclear age -- I do believe that the kind of events which are informed by the cruelty of Trujillo or the carelessness of nuclear escalation nowadays, starts at very personal levels. You know, if you're careless with your thoughts and if you're careless with your relationships to other people, you're going to be careless on a larger level. Hence that move from the father all the way up to the nuclear age.”

RUBIN: “Ending with Trujillo is kind of ending with the ultimate kind of nasty father, I mean evil.”

DOVE: “Oh, I never thought about that.”

RUBIN: “Was it hard to write those poems about your father? Did they come naturally?”

DOVE: “They were hard. They were very hard to write. But in a sense they were the most satisfying to write. Because I was helping myself too. And I felt closer to him afterwards. And I really felt closer to him. The poems helped me to understand him a little bit better.”

DOVE: “Has he read them?”

DOVE: “I don't know. My father had told me at one point that -- he's a chemist -- and he said that he didn't understand poetry. “Don't be upset if I don't read your poems.” That was when I informed him I

was going to be a poet instead of a lawyer, which is what he wanted me to be. But I don't know if he's read them. My parents have my books and I've seen my book in the bedroom. I don't know."

KITCHEN: "There's one part of *Museum* that we've left out, and I think there's a reason for that. And it happens to be my favorite poem of yours. And it begins the book and isn't a part of any of these four sections."

DOVE: "Yeah. Dusting."

KITCHEN: "Dusting. I'd like you to read it first and then talk about why it's here, why it's placed where it is and where it leads to."

DOVE: "All right."

Dusting

'Every day a wilderness—no
shade in sight. Beulah
patient among knickknacks,
the solarium a rage
of light, a grainstorm
as her gray cloth brings
dark wood to life.

Under her hand scrolls
and crests gleam
darker still. What
was his name, that
silly boy at the fair with
the rifle booth? And his kiss and
the clear bowl with one bright
fish, rippling
wound!

Not Michael—
something finer. Each dust
stroke a deep breath and
the canary in bloom.
Wavery memory: home
from a dance, the front door
blown open and the parlor
in snow, she rushed
the bowl to the stove, watched
as the locket of ice
dissolved and he
swam free.

That was years before
Father gave her up
with her name, years before
her name grew to mean
Promise, then
Desert-in-Peace.
Long before the shadow and
sun's accomplice, the tree.

Maurice.'

I wrote *Dusting* at a time of -- in the middle of writing *Museum*, it came out of kind of nowhere. And I didn't realize at that point that it was going to be part of a longer sequence. It's part of *Thomas and Beulah*, the next book. At that time I had been working on some of the poems from *Thomas and Beulah*, but mainly the poems from Thomas's point of view. And I should say something I guess about the structure of that before I go any further."

KITCHEN: "Right."

DOVE: "*Thomas and Beulah* is based very loosely on my grandparents' lives. My grandmother had told me a story that had happened to my grandfather when he was young, coming up on a river boat to Ohio, which is Akron, Ohio, my hometown. That was all I had basically. And the story so fascinated me that I tried to write about it. I started off writing stories about my grandfather, and soon because I ran out of real facts I had to keep going and I made up facts for this character, Thomas. I was writing some of those while I was doing *Museum*. Then this poem appeared, *Dusting*. Really, you know, out of nowhere. I didn't realize that this was Thomas's wife saying, "I want to talk, and you can't do his side without doing my side." So when I had finished *Museum*, I was... This poem didn't really fit in the whole concept in any of the sections. But it did fit into the idea of *Museum*, the idea of dusting, you know, you're wiping away layers of unclarity and things like that. And so that's why it's there as the first poem. Also because it's a poem that deals with people. And I thought that was the way to enter *Museum*, you know, to deal with the dusting and the memory, which is a museum in itself. And then to go from that to the artifacts, which is what the first section is about, the hills, archaeology of things. *Dusting* is a kind of archaeology. That's why I put it ahead of all the other poems as a prologue sort of. But after I finished *Museum* and started to finish up Thomas's poems, I became aware. It was like a light coming on. "Why didn't I see that before? Of course she's got to say her part too. So *Thomas and Beulah* became actually two sides of the same story. The story of a black couple growing up in the industrial Midwest from about 1900-1960, this spread. And the first part is Thomas's point of view. The second part is Beulah his wife's point of view."

KITCHEN: "You used the word underside before. Do you see these as being undersides of each other in some sense?"

DOVE: "I see them as being -- I'm always fascinated with seeing a story from different angles, you know. Seeing things from different angles. But also within these two sequences, I'm not interested in the big moments, you know. Obviously big things happened in those years. I wasn't interested in portraying those moments. I was interested in the things which were concerning these small people, these nobodies, right, in the course of history. So for instance, there's a reference in one of the last poems of

Beulah's to the March on Washington, but it's a very oblique reference. You know, she's much more concerned about the picnic she's at. There are -- I've added a chronology to the end of the book. I never thought I'd do this in my life, that I'd be doing a chronology. But I did a chronology from 1900-1960. It's a very eccentric chronology, but it does have certain facts, things that are happening at the time, you know, so you can see what was happening in the social structure of Midwest America at the time that this couple was growing up."

KITCHEN: "Does it remind you in any sense of *Lowell's Notebook*, where you play off the smaller against the larger forces of history?"

DOVE: "Yes, it does. I didn't think of that while I was doing it, of course. I try not to think of anything else except the poem."

KITCHEN: "Talk about trying not to think about."

DOVE: "Oh gosh. I think the worst thing that can happen to a poet is to be self-conscious, you know, to think that 'I'm writing a poem' at the moment that you're writing a poem. And I think that moment, getting that moment where things begin to click in the poem and you begin to go off in a direction that you didn't know where you're going, but you better just ride that current as far as it will take you. That's such a tenuous connection for me at least, that any self-consciousness is going to kill it right away. I try not to know what I'm doing. That may sound facetious, but I mean I try not to clutter my head up with literary theories and critiques and stuff like that. I don't really want to know where I've been. I only follow what I need, you know. I needed at that point to -- especially after *Museum* -- I needed to get back to family and more personal things. But I wanted to do it in a way that, you know, on a third-person level. I didn't know that I needed that. It was something that I wanted and I took out obviously. And that's one reason why I'm sure it took me so long to figure out that this was going to be a long sequence. Though probably for anyone else looking from the outside they saw it a long time beforehand. But I also tried... Each poem is a new field, you know, to enter. And even in the sequence I tried to approach it as each poem. Not that, "Well, okay, we've got a birth now. We've got to do this." It was each poem. I wanted to hit the lyric moment, these were, they were narrative poems, but I did not want to be wrapped up into relating plots or stories. I wanted each one to be an epiphany. So I had to enter each poem almost kind of blind, though knowing of course there are things that you're influenced, regardless. But I had the background of all the other poems and all that stuff behind me. But I tried to let it bubble up, rather than trying to just impose it onto the page."

RUBIN: "You really do. This points out... Combine what someone might call a novelist's kind of imagination of character, even interior monologue and incident, with really intense lyric poet's love of language, of the individual word, of the moment of epiphany as you said. Would you expand on this, your feeling for language, for the word?"

DOVE: "Language is everything. I mean, I do -- like Mallarmé said, a poem is made of words. It's the language -- it's by language that I enter the poem and that also leads me forward. That doesn't exclude perceptions and experience and emotions or anything like that. But emotion is useless if there's no way to express it, if you can't do that. And there are other art forms -- I mean, language is the clay that we use to make our poems. It's something that I think a lot of people who are not writers take for granted. It would never dawn on someone that doesn't sculpt that they could just simply walk up to a block of marble and just hack away. They know they have to learn something. Because all of us use language, we

assume, "Well, anyone can do that. You know, I talk every day." But there's a different use of language, and you know that. So it's the way of telling something that makes for me a poem. There's nothing new under the sun, but it's the way you see it. And for me as a poet, language becomes an integral part of that perception, the way one sees it."

RUBIN: "Let's pursue that in your own working methods a little further. Do you say your poems aloud as you're creating them? Do you revise much?"

DOVE: "I revise, oh, incessantly. And usually when I'm starting to work on a poem, I don't read it aloud until it gets to a certain point. You can lull yourself with your own voice. But I hear it in my head. At a certain point I do read a poem aloud to myself, you know, because it's got to also work for me as music. I never want to lose that part of a poem. Also when I write a poem, as you probably can tell by now, I don't start out with a notion of how this is going to proceed. Often I'll enter a poem through a word or a phrase that you know, compels me. I think in *Dusting* it was the word Maurice. It really started with Maurice. I thought this was a wonderful name and it was a romantic name and all of these things. And I had no idea -- you know, I had it down in my notebook, Maurice. Okay. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, so I ended it through that last word in a way."

RUBIN: "Do you keep a writer's notebook for your own personal --"

DOVE: "I keep a notebook. Because I don't work from beginning to end. You know, it can start in the middle. I keep everything in my notebook. You know, I keep grocery lists in there. I try not to make it sacred, because I could get uptight, you know, if I thought, "Oh, this is my notebook. You know, it only contains gems," or something. Of course it contains a lot of junk too. But I keep a notebook because sometimes it is a word that attracts me. And I don't want to feel compelled to explain why it attracts me. So if I have a notebook, I just put it in there. I don't think about it anymore. If I overhear a conversation and something is really wonderful about it, I put it in. I don't ask any questions. I just put it in. That way, when I sit down to write, I'll leaf through my notebook and wait for something to hit me and say, "Oh, that's neat," without thinking about what I'm going to do with it. If I think it's nice, I'll start with it and see where it leads me. In most cases. Of course with *Parsley* I had the incident beforehand, you know."

RUBIN: "Do you think of audience at some point?"

DOVE: "No. Never."

RUBIN: "Can you say briefly what got you started as a poet? What has been most helpful to you in finding your own language? That's a topic for another whole interview."

DOVE: "Yeah. Well, I'm trying to think. I hate to say I've always written. I think everybody's always written, but most people stop at a certain point, and then others just go on. I loved to write as a child. Talking about language and entering through language, when I think about it, something that happened to me in third grade is probably indicative of that tendency to go toward language rather than content. We did spelling lessons in class, you know, those horrible spelling books we had to memorize 20 words each week. And we had to do those. For me it seemed fairly idiotic spelling lessons. Use each of these words in a sentence. I got finished early usually in class, and so I started writing a little novel using the words for each week. And each week I'd write a chapter. And I made rules for myself, the words in the order they appeared. You can't change them, you can't make them plural or in past or present tense. So

by using those words I started making up a story, you know, and I had to go through it through the words. It was really fun to have a whole world open up that you know, I hadn't pre-determined. So from an early point it was the language that intrigued me. And I don't know if there's anything that was telling, you know, as a thing that made me want to write poems necessarily more than anything else, or that had changed me. But that was something, so it's been there."

RUBIN: "As good a starting point I guess as any. I think we're near the end. And Judy and I have competing ideas of poems we'd like you to read. So I'll just mention I'd like you to read Flirtation which has in it a marvelous word, topiary. And a lot of your poems seem to have a magical word that radiates. Judy's going to ask you however to in fact end with a poem from the Ohio Review that hasn't yet appeared in the collection."

KITCHEN: "I'd like you to read Variation on Pain."

DOVE: "Okay."

KITCHEN: "Simply because we got into your love of music, and this seems to be a poem about music."

RUBIN: "This will appear in Thomas and Beulah."

DOVE: "This will appear in Thomas and Beulah. It's a poem where Thomas, a friend of his has died and he feels guilty for it. So Thomas takes the mandolin from his friend and learns how to play it. That's the scene for Variation on Pain.

'Two strings, one pierced cry.
So many ways to imitate
The ringing in his ears.

He lay on the bunk, mandolin
In his arms. Two strings
For each note and seventeen
Frets; ridged sound
Humming beneath calloused
Fingertips.

There was a needle
In his head but nothing
Fit through it. Sound quivered
Like a rope stretched clear
To land, tensed and brimming,
A man gurgling air.

Two greased strings
For each pierced lobe;
So is the past forgiven."

RUBIN: "Rita Dove, thank you for being our guest today."

DOVE: "Thank you."

RUBIN: "And Judy, thank you."

DOVE: "It was a pleasure."

[Music]

ANNOUNCER: "This exclusive Brockport Writers Forum program was recorded on videotape on March 7th, 1985 as part of the Writer's Forum. A Department of English presentation. This has been a production of the Educational Communication Center, State University of New York, College at Brockport."