

Shares in VHS Concept Industries rose slightly on news that Kenneth Goldmine and Vanessa Plot filed a \$100,000,000 lawsuit against Donald and Melania Trump. The suit alleges that on July 19th Melania Trump appropriated without legal authorization Goldmine and Plot's trademarked concept of replicating material related to African-American topics, texts, autopsies, and First Ladies...

Etc. It's a neat structural satire. But it's not as boldly counter-avant-garde—Confessional, even—as Johnson's apparently true account of talking with Vanessa Place on the train from Princeton to Newark airport, which concludes:

I'm no less sceptical about the current version of Conceptual Poetry, no less sceptical at all. But I have to say that I came away, really, liking Vanessa Place quite a good bit, life is strange.

Jeremy Noel-Tod

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Rita Dove, *Collected Poems: 1974–2004*. New York: Norton, 2016. 420 pp. \$39.95

In 1994, at the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference at James Madison University, a well-known black poet, now deceased, turned to me after a Rita Dove reading and said, “I don't get it.” I agreed. By then I'd read a couple of Dove's books, and while I appreciated the craftsmanship, I was not overly impressed. Recently, I was talking to another poet, a white woman, about having agreed to review this collection, and when I expressed my trepidations about doing so, she asked me what I thought about all the stuff that's happened to Dove in the last few years. She was presumably referring to one of those poetry business skirmishes that are significant enough to get the momentary attention of the mainstream media. In this case, it was Helen Vendler's condescending 2011 review of Dove's editing of the *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*. But I was already thinking about Dove's career, which spans over forty years and at least nine books, so I thought she meant Dove had been recently dismissed as a poet. That isn't what she meant, of course, and my misinterpretation was simply another indication of what I myself had been thinking about over the last year and a half. That's because in 2014 I attended the third Furious Flower Poetry Conference and Dove was again present. This time my reaction was markedly different; I was impressed with the work, and her speech, though I still could not explain exactly why.

Perhaps that is why I agreed to review this collection, to see if I could make sense of my appreciation for the work despite the gap between Dove's aesthetics and my own. Although the book's blurb praises Dove for her "fresh configurations of the traditional and experimental," that assessment seems to me only half right. It's true that Dove occasionally deploys more recent "postmodern" strategies of lineation (e.g., parallel columns, concrete shapes, etc.), but these are simply examples of her appropriation of styles and strategies too widespread to be deemed experimental. Moreover, these few "experiments" don't always showcase Dove at her best. On the other hand, the lyric-driven narrative structure that informs her prize-winning 1986 book, *Thomas and Beulah*, is a perfect example of Dove's ability to use traditional forms to drive home an important story. And Dove is, above all, a lyric poet—not because she is so interested in self-expression (though there are plenty of poems that do just that) but rather because she often uses lyric to drive narrative. It is just as accurate, then, to call Dove a narrative poet, even a poet of the ballad.

In that regard, Dove is, for me, the Toni Morrison of poetry. (Dove's 1989 book, *Grace Notes*, opens with an epigraph from Morrison.) In making this claim I am not merely shifting the basis of evaluation from aesthetics to sociology, as if two black women writers must have something in common. Rather, I am claiming that Dove's ability to use lyric as a vehicle for narrative is not unlike Morrison's ability to use traditional narrative devices to drive lyrical, "poetic" phrases, sentences, and, at her best, entire novels. Of course, one could easily counter that however similar they may be at the level of genre and style, all the way down to syntax, at the level of semantics Morrison is nevertheless a much more ambivalent writer, especially in her early fiction, than Dove. *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and one of my favorites, *Sula*, all explore the way the complex geographical and sociopolitical worlds inhabited by Morrison's protagonists mirror psychological states too complicated to resolve into fixed, stable identities. No doubt it was the opposite facet of Dove's reading back in 1994, her desire for straightforward and mostly uncluttered closure, that led to my poet-friend's and my own dismissal of Dove as a minor poet.

But reading through forty years of poetry, one comes away with a much more nuanced picture of Dove's writing. Like that of other black women writers, from Morrison to Alice Walker and Michele Wallace, Dove's relationship to the Black Arts Movement is complicated at best. Unlike her peers in fiction and nonfiction, however, Dove can be both critical of and seduced by close-to-caricature flights of testosterone, one of the classic targets of the critiques leveled from within at the Black Arts Movement. This element, her unapologetic sensuality, is precisely what separates Dove

from other black women writers of her generation. (Perhaps only Toni Cade Bambara was close to her in temperament.) Dove embraces even as she maintains a wary distance from the very elements that constitute Negro and black culture. Her *Collected Poems* reveals the degree to which she anticipates, in both attitude and aesthetics, the critical engagement with the idea of black culture itself that one now sees in an expanding group of younger African American poets, including A. Van Jordan, Kevin Young, Tracy K. Smith, Major Jackson, Wendy Walters, and others.

The template for Dove's general attitude and aesthetics can be read in the poems that make up *Thomas and Beulah*, but the advantage of a collected poems is that readers can assess these patterns in light of their early stirrings and later reverberations. Reading through the *Collected Poems*, one can see that the issues in *Thomas and Beulah* have personal, not just "historical," significance for Dove. Beulah's relationship to her family redounds to Dove's relationship to hers. There is more than just a stand-alone indictment to a poem like "Taking in Wash," which details the swaying affection and violence of Beulah's father ("Papa called her Pearl when he came home / drunk") alongside the stoic protection of her mother ("Mama a tight dark fist. / *Touch that child // and I'll cut you down / just like the cedar of Lebanon*"). This poem follows and precedes others that suggest Thomas has the same, or at least similar, "problems": the desire to take a rural black life segregated from the larger culture by law and custom and trade it in for a more "integrated," and thus more "prosperous," life in town.

In *Thomas and Beulah*, this integrationist desire is widespread in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, as the epigraph to section one, "Mandolin," indicates: "Black Boy, O Black Boy / is the port worth the cruise?" These lines from Melvin B. Tolson's incomplete *Harlem Gallery: Book One* could serve as a foreword to all of Dove's early poems—and, for the same reasons, the early novels by Morrison. Tolson's criticism is sweeping; it applies not only to the imminent victory of the Civil Rights Movement over black militancy but also to the more romantic gestures of the Harlem Renaissance. Equally sweeping is the conclusion of Dove's poem "Wingfoot Lake," told from Beulah's perspective:

That brave swimming

scared her, like Joanna saying
Mother, we're Afro-Americans now!
What did she know about Africa?
Were there lakes like this one
with a rowboat pushed under the pier?

Or Thomas' Great Mississippi
with its sullen silks? (There was
the Nile but the Nile belonged

to God.) Where she came from
was the past, 12 miles into town
where nobody had locked their back door,
and Goodyear hadn't begun to dream of a park
under the company symbol, a white foot
sprouting two white wings.

For the descendants of African slaves, the changing monikers of self-identity are linked to what was, for Tolson, but not for the precocious Langston Hughes of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," impossible to deny: the ineluctable Americanism of the Negro. (Hence Tolson's mocking "Black Boy, O Black Boy" comments on the new name that supposedly rendered "Negro" obsolete.) Beulah is no scholar of history, but like Dove's Salomé she has "a head on [her] shoulders." She knows that in her past, in the rural life outside town, no one "locked their back door." And she even senses what we today recognize as the privatization of the public commons, all in the name of progress: "a park / under the company symbol." For Beulah, as for Virginia Woolf, however, "escape" is interiorized. She "wanted a little room for thinking: / but she saw diapers steaming on the line, / a doll slumped behind the door." This desire for a room of one's own captures Dove's ambivalence when she becomes a mother herself, an event that appears to trigger daughter poems—that is, poems about Dove herself as a daughter, Dove's own daughter, and mythical daughters like Persephone.

The bulk of the mother and daughter poems, both personal and mythical, are concentrated in *Grace Notes* and *Mother Love* (1995). On the one hand, Dove goes over well-trod territory in Persephone's ambivalence and Demeter's grief, and, in the eponymous "Mother Love," she takes savage delight in the fetishization, vis-à-vis Medea et al., of postpartum depression as potential matricide: "Oh, I know it / looked damning: at the hearth a muttering crone / bent over a baby sizzling on a spit." On the other hand, in *Grace Notes* the frustration is human. There are poems about her and her daughter comparing their genitalia ("After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time before Bed") and aging processes ("Genetic Expedition"). But the desire for that room alone leads off the collection. "The Other Side of the House" captures a moment that seems as though it came right out of Mrs. Ramsey in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Somewhere // I learned to walk out of a thought / and not snap back the way / railroad cars telescope into a train."

Fortunately for her readers, Dove is both Mrs. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe, and many of the other poems in *Grace Notes* and *Mother Love* offer portraits of the artist struggling to juggle multiple responsibilities.

Hardly do the themes and subjects of the poems and books that I have singled out above constitute the entirety, or even the bulk, of Dove's concerns. This *Collected Poems* also includes Dove's other long historical book, *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), parts of which mimic the structures of dramatic dialogue in Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*. But chiefly Dove's other concerns are fairly traditional: *ars poetica*, odes to other poets, accounts of travel, musings on national history, and meditations on the natural world. For me, however, the most compelling parts of the collection are those poems about ordinary black social and community life, usually set in the South: parties, family reunions, picnics, barbecues, and—most interesting of all—dance hall balls, the scenes of those big-band swing dances such as the foxtrot and American Smooth (the latter enshrined in the title of her 2004 collection). Her poem "Chocolate" will remind many readers of Elizabeth Alexander's equally mouthwatering "Butter," both poems celebrating the culinary delights of food that may not be good *for* you but are nevertheless good *to* you. The paean to good food exemplifies how firmly Dove remains earthbound and locked into the present; the absence of the "black church" as an object of veneration is not insignificant to the place she occupies among her poetic forerunners and the younger generation. *Collected Poems: 1974–2004* is a compelling case for Dove as a major lyric and narrative poet, one of the best of the second half of the twentieth century.

Tyrone Williams