

Rita Dove

from

Meditation: On the Bus with Rosa Parks



Freedom Ride

As if, after High Street
and the left turn onto Exchange,
the view would veer onto
someplace fresh: Curaçao,
or the mosque adrift on a milk-fed pond.
But there's just more cloud cover,
and germier air
condensing on the tinted glass,
and the little houses with
their fearful patches of yard
rushing into the flames.

Pull the cord a stop too soon, and
you'll find yourself walking
a gauntlet of stares.
Daydream, and you'll wake up
in the stale dark of a cinema,
Dallas playing its mistake over and over
until even that sad reel won't stay
stuck—there's still
Bobby and Malcolm and Memphis,

at every corner the same
scorched brick, darkened windows.

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

The Enactment

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

—Mary Ware, née Smith

Can't use no teenager, especially
no poor black trash,
no matter what her parents do
to keep up a living. Can't use
anyone without sense enough
to bite their tongue.

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

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

are under arrest.

She must sit there, and not smile
as they enter to carry her off;

she must know who to call
who will know who else to call
to bail her out . . . and only then

can she stand up and exhale,
can she walk out the cell
and down the jail steps
into flashbulbs and
her employer's white
arms—and go home,
and sit down in the seat
we have prepared for her.

Rosa

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

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

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

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