

## Poets and Their Love Affairs – with the Library



### On Poetry

Written by  
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Filed Under: [Life](#)

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I remember with fondness its pink stucco walls and scalloped roof. The terracotta roof tiles overlap like fish scales. Their baked-earth red glints in the Florida sun. The tiles bake all spring, summer, fall.

*Wilmington Public Library in Rodney Square is undergoing a vast renovation to prepare it to serve more people in the digital age.*

The low building looks south, facing the lake, on the corner of Lake Morton Drive and Massachusetts Avenue – in Lakeland, my hometown.

The front entrance of the building is framed with bas-relief vines and white columns topped with tabernacles. At the “shoulders” of the big arched doorway are circular designs of an owl and a book, symbols of learning. Engraved above the arch: “Public Library.”

Built in 1927 in the Mediterranean Revival style, with ornamental ironwork and Spanish light fixtures, the old Lakeland Public Library’s tall arched windows gave it the feel of a chapel. At age seven I considered it a hallowed site, as holy as the other place with tall arched windows, St. Joseph’s Catholic Church.

Because I was most often at the library in the late afternoon, I remember the main reading room as a flood of golden light. With dark rows to hide in. No one bothered me.

Charles Simic, former U.S. poet laureate, seems to recall his library with reverence, too—a species of reverence all his own. His poem, “In the Library” begins

*There's a book called  
"A Dictionary of Angels."  
No one has opened it in fifty years,  
I know, because when I did,  
The covers creaked, the pages  
Crumbled. There I discovered*

*The angels were once as plentiful  
As species of flies.  
The sky at dusk  
Used to be thick with them.  
You had to wave both arms  
Just to keep them away.*

I was cowed by my public library's opulence, its towers of books, sky-high emperor palms and groomed azaleas. At first I was hesitant to approach the librarian for anything. Once I waited a critically long time to ask her for the location of the bathroom.

Soon enough, however, the library's luxury emboldened me. I was licensed to touch any book I pleased! To open the wooden drawers! To replace the needle on a track I loved, over and over, over and over.

I wish I could find the buck-toothed girl who was me, entering the cool foyer. What expression did she wear? What table did she choose? What were her fears and joys?

"I wish I could find that skinny, long-beaked boy/ who perched in the branches of the old branch library," muses American poet Edward Hirsch, with his trademark tenderness and restraint, in the poem "Branch Library."

*He spent the Sabbath flying between the wobbly stacks  
and the flimsy wooden tables on the second floor,*

*pecking at nuts, nesting in broken spines, scratching  
notes under his own corner patch of sky.*

"A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people," said Andrew Carnegie, American philanthropist and builder of libraries. "It is a never-failing spring in the desert."

I loved as a child and will always love the library's riches. Like Edward Hirsch, Charles Simic and other bookish kids, I discovered that the public library was my "corner patch of sky"—a place of privacy, in limitlessness.

It was the oasis where I escaped not only downtown's subtropical heat, but the brazen stares my otherness attracted, I was aware, as I rode the city bus with my siblings or traipsed the chalk-white sidewalks.

In the library I learned to be alone with myself and my thoughts—essential training for a writer. Reading took me past myself, and allowed my thoughts to travel in all directions, like light.

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Esteemed American poet Rita Dove, who served as U.S. poet laureate from 1993 to 1995, pays homage to her childhood library in “Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967.” It is a love poem, she explains, to the place where “I could walk any aisle/and smell wisdom.” Like the library it praises, the poem itself is a cornucopia. It alludes, wryly, to the teenager’s social acumen, her love of science, and her prescient understanding that the library aggravated her thirst for knowledge as much as it quenched it.

This poem is one of the poems Rita Dove read during her appearance at the White House in 2011 (available on YouTube).

### **Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967**

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

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

As for the improbable librarian  
with her salt and paprika upsweep,  
her British accent and sweater clip  
(mom of a kid I knew from school)—  
I’d go up to her desk and ask for help  
on bareback rodeo or binary codes,  
phonics, Gestalt theory,  
lead poisoning in the Late Roman Empire,  
the play of light in Dutch Renaissance painting;  
I would claim to be researching  
pre-Columbian pottery or Chinese foot-binding,

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

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

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

I can eat an elephant  
if I take small bites.

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

--Rita Dove

"Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967" by Rita Dove is published in "*On the Bus with Rosa Parks*" (W.W.Norton, 2000). You can read "Branch Library" by Edward Hirsch at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). "In the Library" by Charles Simic is available at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org).

**If You Go**

**Public lecture by Rita Dove: Thursday, April 18, 2013, 5:00pm**

Trabant University Center, Multipurpose Rooms A and B, University of Delaware, Newark

**Poetry reading by Rita Dove: Friday, April 19, 2013, 2:00 pm**

Gore Recital Hall, Roselle Center for the Arts, University of Delaware.

Both events are free and open to the public. Professor Dove's visit is part of UD's *Transnational Encounters Visiting Writers Series* For information: [www.english.udel.edu](http://www.english.udel.edu)

One of the foremost poets of our time, honored and celebrated in the United States and around the world, Rita Dove served as the United States Poet Laureate 1993-1995 and is the winner of the National Medal of Arts (2011) and the Pulitzer Prize (1987).

JoAnn Balingit is Delaware's poet laureate. She writes "On Poetry" to celebrate National Poetry Month. For information on her readings and workshops: <http://joannbalingit.org>.