

From Far Away, #58
by Moira Roth

ODETTA ON HER WAY

December 4, 2008

She was young,
just over thirty,
When she sang



At the August 28, 1963
Civil Rights March on Washington D.C.

Where
Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his speech,
"I Have A Dream."



She sang
Of freedom

Sang
"Oh freedom, oh freedom
Oh freedom over me

And before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be free."

And that day also
She sang another song
Called
"I'm on My Way."

Over the years
Odetta continued on her way,
Continued singing
Continued protesting
Continued to remind us of civil rights
Continued to celebrate moments of triumph.

Indeed if she hadn't died
Two days ago
—dying in New York City
on December 2, 2008,
having been born in Birmingham, Alabama,
on December 31, 1930—
She had wanted to sing
At Barack Obama's inauguration.

In today's *New York Times*
I read in Odetta's obituary
That Rosa Parks
—who herself died in 2005 at age 92—
When asked
Which songs meant most to her,
Replied:
"All of the songs Odetta sings."

Odetta and Rosa Parks?

Both dead,
Yet in my mind's eye
Both appear so alive
As I sit thinking about them
In Nabolom, the Berkeley café I go to daily.

In my mind's eye
I see Rosa Parks,
In her early 40s,
In a bus in Montgomery, Alabama,

On December 1, 1955



And that same year,
with Martin Luther King, Jr.



I sit here,
Imagining Odetta
in 1950 San Francisco



When
At age 19

She discovered
The city's Bohemian coffee houses,
Having come to the city
To be in the chorus of a musical
--her first professional appearance--
But then discovered
North Beach and folk singing.

Each evening,
After the theater ended,
She and the other performers
Would "go to the joint,
And people would sit around
Playing guitars and singing songs,
And it felt like home."

And so,
She quit the theater company
To come "home."

She was on her way

She was on her way

Singing

On her way for many decades.

And now that Odetta's dead
We must listen to her voice
And sing with her.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyvBvrD1r44>