

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 15, 2018

A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from *The Americans*

3. *Help*, 1968

After a photograph from *The Americans* by Robert Frank

When I see Frank's photograph
of a white infant in the dark arms
of a woman who must be the maid,
I think of my mother and the year
we spent alone—my father at sea.

The woman stands in profile, back
against a wall, holding her charge,
their faces side-by-side—the look
on the child's face strangely prescient,
a small dimple furrowing the space
between her brows. Neither of them
looks toward the camera; nor
do they look at each other. That year,

when my mother took me for walks,
she was mistaken again and again
for my maid. Years later she told me
she'd say I was her daughter, and each time
strangers would stare in disbelief, then
empty the change from their pockets. Now

I think of the betrayals of flesh, how
she must have tried to make of her face
an inscrutable mask and hold it there
as they made their small offerings—
pressing coins into my hands. How
like the woman in the photograph
she must have seemed, carrying me
each day—white in her arms—as if
she were a prop: a black backdrop,
the dark foil in this American story.

Natasha Trethewey¹

¹“The Americans” by Natasha Trethewey from *Thrall*, Mariner Books. Used by permission.

❧ Reflections

I'm thrilled that Natasha Trethewey has agreed to come to Richmond, Virginia, to read from her work. In anticipation of her visit, I have prepared the next two editions of *Wellspring* to highlight a poem from her most recent collection, *Thrall*. (*Wellspring* will take a brief hiatus while I am on leave. This resource will resume in March.)

Thrall was published in 2012, just as Trethewey took up the post of United States Poet Laureate, and five years after she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her third collection of verse, *Native Guard*, which elegizes her late mother while probing the complexity of the American South and its relationship to family, history, war, and race. In many ways, *Thrall* works as a kind of follow up to *Native Guard* and, when it was reissued in 2015, served as a particularly poignant elegy for her father, Eric Trethewey, who died in 2014. While *Native Guard* pays homage to her mother, a woman murdered by her second ex-husband, *Thrall* examines complicated feelings—ambivalence, resentment, grief, gratitude—concerning the tensions between a biracial woman and her white father.

Many of the poems in *Thrall* are ekphrastic—that is, they are inspired by other artwork; they describe, engage, narrate, reflect and, consequently, amplify and expand the meaning of and implications of each. In the case of “The Americans” (from which “Help” comes, printed here), she engages with the work of Robert Frank, the highly influential photographer who travelled across the United States with his family on an extended road trip in order to photograph society “at all strata.” Frank’s photographs, according to many, changed the course of twentieth-century photography by exposing a rather ugly underside of American life: racism, corruption, consumption. While “The Americans” also documents beauty and preserves icons of Americana culture, the book was as provocative in the 1950s as it is now, especially when engaged in this kind of artistic dialogue with Trethewey’s poems.

Trethewey’s personal history seems to me inextricable from the political ugliness that haunts her biography, and her reckoning with this tension is what inspires, motivates, and complicates her work. Her mother, a black woman, and her father, a white man, married even though it was illegal to do so. Raising a biracial child in the deep south in the late 1960s and 70s was surely met with a kind of estrangement and isolation, as Trethewey’s poems suggest. (In interviews, she discloses that the Ku Klux Klan once burned a cross on their lawn.) After her parents divorced, her mother remarried and divorced again, and was murdered by her second ex-husband in 1985, when Natasha was a freshman in college. Of course, poetry would help not only to process this traumatic loss, but also to propel an artistic investigation into larger issues of family, history, and race in America.

My commentary here is less a reflection on this particular poem, and more a biographical sketch that I hope may orient new readers to her important contributions to contemporary arts and letters. It is my hope, too, that by placing her poems in a particular historical and social context they might, by their elegance, grace, and restraint, help all of us better understand our complicated collective history, our own identities, and the position and responsibilities of poetry in the world to enlighten, probe, communicate, and engage. In her

own words, Trethewey says (in an interview with Diane Rehm), “Poetry is the best way we have of reaching not only the intellect, but also the heart, because poetry creates that sense of empathy in us. It is for me now a way to speak very intimately to a reader. And I do think that people find in art the need and the necessity, the ability to convey those most difficult and necessary things.”

>About the Poet

Natasha Trethewey was the 19th United States Poet Laureate and the first one to relocate to Washington, D.C., in order to work out of the Library of Congress. She was the first person to serve simultaneously as the Poet Laureate of a state, Mississippi, and the nation. In 2007, she received a Pulitzer Prize for her poetry collection, *Native Guard*; her most recent book, *Thrall*, continues an exploration of racial difference in America. The daughter of a mixed-race marriage, Trethewey explores subjects that are both personal and historical: she confronts racial tension through the lens of her parents' divorce, the murder of her mother, and the grief and trauma that resulted from both. She studied English at the University of Georgia, earned an MA in English and creative writing from Hollins University, and received an MFA in poetry from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She teaches at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

She will read at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Thursday, January 25. The event is free and open to the public and will be followed by a reception and book signing.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
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