

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 22, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from *Geography*

2.

At Wolf River my father is singing.
The sun is shining and there's a cooler
of Pabst in the shade. He is singing
and playing the guitar—the sad songs
I hide from each time: a man pining
for Irene or Clementine, a woman dead
on a slab at Saint James. I'm too young to know
this is foreshadowing. To get away from
the blues I don't understand, I wade in water
shallow enough to cross. On the bank
at the other side, I look back at him as if
across the years: he's smaller, his voice
lost in the distance between us.

Natasha Trethewey¹

Reflections

What is printed here is excerpted from a longer, three-part poem from *Thrall*, Natasha Trethewey's most recent collection and the follow-up to her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Native Guard* which honors a black regiment of Union soldiers who played a pivotal role in the Civil War, guarding Confederate captives. *Native Guard* also recalls Trethewey's own childhood as the daughter of a black woman and white man and elegizes her mother, murdered when Trethewey was 19 years old.

Thrall reads as a meditation on all the ways that word can mean: thrall, a noun, is the state of being held in servitude or submission; thrall is a servant slave, a person captive. The poems in this collection blur public and private boundaries as Trethewey continues to probe racial

¹ from "Geography" by Natasha Trethewey from *Thrall*, Mariner Books. Used by permission.

attitudes and stereotypes through both personal and historical lenses, exploring the ways in which we are held captive—literally and figuratively—by the circumstances of our birth, our families, our memories, our own identity, and our collective history. She draws inspiration from other sources—Renaissance paintings, 18th, 19th, and 20th century artwork, other cultures, other families, other periods—in order to explore what it means to be of mixed race. As she says in an interview with *World Literature Today*, “Part of what I’m trying to do is to tell fuller versions of...our shared history...”

But *Thrall* is certainly more than a meditation on culture and race; it’s also a bittersweet elegy for Trethewey’s father, the poet Eric Trethewey. Interestingly, he was still alive when the book was published, still alive when Trethewey was drafting the poems in this book that seem to foreshadow her grief, pondering what it means to mourn a relationship even before it has ended. Their relationship was a complicated one and the underlying tension shapes the book; the opening poem, titled “Elegy,” and written *before* his death, strikes a chord with which the poem printed here, “Geography,” seems to harmonize. As Trethewey has explained, “...what’s being elegized is not my father’s life—he’s not dead—but a kind of loss between a father and a daughter, a kind of estrangement. He’s casting his invisible lines, slicing the sky between us, and I mean that image to suggest a kind of division.”

The final lines of this section of “Geography” strike me as particularly poignant—“his voice / lost in the distance between us.” Her ambivalence toward her white father further complicates the other questions this collection raises: How are we to reconcile a past we can never know with a present that is difficult to understand? How are we to untangle the complexity of familial relationships especially when they seem to become *more*, not less, tangled as we age? How are we to look closely at the past, at art, at our own families and ever make sense of a history of violence, cruelty, and distrust? Perhaps we are all trying “[t]o get away / from the blues [we] don’t understand...” I appreciate what the critic Craig Morgan Teicher, an editor at *Publishers Weekly*, writes: “Trethewey...takes as her major subject the complex and conflicted identity as neither white nor black in a country that likes black-and-white distinctions. Most remarkably, these poems never really answer their questions about identity, belonging, loyalty and love. Instead, they are precise about having no answers.”

Wellspring readers know by now that I often value question-asking over answering, ambiguity over certainty, and that I believe it is the essential work of poetry to remind us of our complexity without pretending a solution to it. I agree with what Trethewey says, that poetry “can speak to all of us. It helps us not only to grieve our losses but to celebrate our joys and triumphs. It is open to all of us. It’s the best thing we’ve got. It’s the most humane repository for our feelings and our thoughts, our most humane and dignified thoughts.”

This particular *Wellspring* meditation is perhaps attempting to do too much in too short a space: Trethewey’s work, and *Thrall* specifically, are worthy of much closer study and a much more intensive reflection. For now, though, I invite all of you to come hear this Pulitzer Prize-winning former United States Poet Laureate read at St. Stephen’s on January 25. It is an opportunity not to be missed.

✧ About the poet

Natasha Trethewey, 19th Poet Laureate of the United States, is the author of four collections of poetry: *Thrall*; *Native Guard*, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry; *Bellocq's Ophelia*; and *Domestic Work*. She has also written a book of nonfiction, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* which blends personal history with cultural commentary, portraying a Gulf Coast whose African American citizens were marginalized well before Hurricane Katrina devastated the area. Trethewey was the first African American to be named Poet Laureate since Rita Dove, in 1993. She teaches at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Natasha Trethewey reads at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on Thursday, January 25 at 7 p.m. The event is free and open to the public and will be followed by a book signing and reception.

**Wellspring* will take a six-week hiatus while Allison Seay is on leave. It will return for the Spring Covenant Period in early March.



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