

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 24, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

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



## *Dusting*

Thank you for these tiny  
particles of ocean salt,  
pearl-necklace viruses,  
winged protozoans:  
for the infinite,  
intricate shapes  
of submicroscopic living things.

For algae spores  
and fungus spores,  
bonded by vital  
mutual genetic cooperation,  
spreading their  
inseparable lives from equator to pole.

My hand, my arm,  
make sweeping circles.  
Dust climbs the ladder of light.  
For this infernal, endless chore,  
for these eternal seeds of rain:  
Thank you. For dust.

Marilyn Nelson<sup>1</sup>

## ☞ Reflections

I remember hearing Krista Tippett and Marilyn Nelson in conversation (on Tippett's public radio program *On Being*<sup>2</sup>) and I have since found the transcript of that episode for the sole purpose of rediscovering this particular passage. It is Nelson responding to the poem of hers I have offered here: "...I read someplace that dust is one of the cleanest things on the planet...You can wash in dust and... we can't have rain without dust. Dust seeds clouds so that rain happens. We wouldn't have rain without dust, which I think is beautiful. And that

---

<sup>1</sup> "Dusting" by Marilyn Nelson from *Magnificat*, Louisiana State University Press. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/marilyn-nelson-communal-pondering-in-a-noisy-world-feb2017/>

dust is full of life, that the things listed in my poem are things that are in dust, that dust is alive.”

That episode of *On Being* is titled “Communal Pondering in a Noisy World” and in it Tippet invites Nelson to expand on her notion that poetry’s “spacious perspective” might be the healing counter to our haste and noise. A teacher of both poetry and other contemplative practices, Nelson is a firm believer in the urgent necessity of silence, the way poetry emerges from silence while also leading us back to it.

Poetry also emerges from living, and from noticing what’s alive: like dust. Like the tiny particles of things all around. Like the dirt and dormancy of winter ground. Like the fragile living earth we continue to abuse. Like the rivers and oceans and the wildlife for which that water is a home. Like the living creatures everywhere we turn. Like the plain faces of the people we see each day, and the people by which we will pass but once. It’s all made of poetry, and poetry is made of it.

Elsewhere in that episode, Tippet relays a conversation she had with the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, Paul Muldoon, who said, “Americans think they don’t read poetry, but they walk around singing poetry all the time. Music carries poetry, but we don’t think of it that way.” She goes on to connect that to church communities, the way we sing hymns, know them by heart, and yet walk around all our lives never calling it poetry.

I think to myself how often I have gazed at dust and not called it poetry, either. How often have I looked at the earth, or one of its creatures, and called it not poetry. And worse, how often have I looked into the face of a human being and forgotten to consider them works of art. We are making sweeping circles wherever we go, through dust seen and unseen and I am glad for this reminder: yes, indeed, thank you for dust, the living stuff from which we have come.

### ✧ About the poet

**Marilyn Nelson** (b. 1946) was born in Cleveland, Ohio; her mother was a teacher and her father was one of the last of the Tuskegee Airmen. Author of several collections of poetry, including verse for children and young adults, Nelson was elected a chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 2013 until 2018, and is professor emerita of English at the University of Connecticut. A three-time finalist for the National Book Award, she was also the state of Connecticut’s poet laureate from 2001 to 2006.



### **Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey**

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church © 2020