

## U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey Gets Second Term

Hello again, and welcome back for more As It Is.

I'm June Simms with VOA Learning English.

Today, we hear about Natasha Trethewey's appointment to a second term as Poet Laureate of the United States. The person who holds this position is charged with raising the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of poetry.

The Library of Congress announced that it was appointing Natasha Trethewey to a second term as Poet Laureate of the United States. The Librarian of Congress praised the Mississippi's native's poems. He said they "dig beneath the surface of history ... to explore the human struggles that we all face."

VOA's Adam Phillips spoke with the Pulitzer Prize winning poet about her writing, her past, and her position as "the face of American poetry."

Whenever the U.S. Poet Laureate is asked for a simple definition of a poet, she quotes the early 19th century British poet Percy Shelley. He said that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Natasha Trethewey agrees.

“I think that poems legislate the world for us because they not only reckon with the past, with our history as human beings, but they also help us to envision and imagine the better worlds that we are every day working to build. Poetry can do that for us.”

The nation's 19th Poet Laureate was born to a white father and a black mother in Mississippi in 1966. At that time, inter-racial marriage was still against the law. Her poetry often explores the way her personal history and that troubled period of American history reflect each other.

She explores ideas about racial difference in her poem “Knowledge.” It was based on a Victorian drawing that shows several white male doctors performing an autopsy on a young woman who had drowned. But it also contains a line written by her father, who is also a poet.

... In the drawing this is only the first cut,

a delicate wounding: and yet how easily  
the anatomist's blade opens a place in me,

like a curtain drawn upon a room in which  
each learned man is my father

and I hear, again, his words - I study  
my crossbreed child - misnomer

and taxonomy, the language of zoology. Here,  
he is all of them: the preoccupied man -

an artist, collector of experience, the skeptic angling  
his head, his thoughts tilting toward  
what I cannot know;...

Trethewey says that when she hears her father read the line "I study my crossbreed child," she feels like an object on display. This, she says, is partly because of the word 'study.'

"I felt that I was sort of being examined under a microscope or looked at in a sort of scientific sort of way by a distant lens. But also because of the word 'crossbreed.' Because of course, in the (English) language, human beings can't be 'crossbreeds.' So the word itself implies something of animal husbandry."

During her younger years, Natasha Trethewey wrote only fiction, not poetry. But that changed after her mother was murdered by an abusive second husband in 1985. Trethewey was 19 years old at the time.

"It seemed to me that poetry was the only way to reckon with that loss and what I was feeling."

The poem "What is Evidence" is from "Native Guard," the collection of Trethewey's poems that earned her the 2007 Pulitzer Prize. It brings to mind images of the abuse her mother suffered before she was killed.

Not the fleeting bruises she'd cover  
with makeup, a dark patch as if imprint  
of a scope she'd pressed her eye too close to,  
looking for a way out, nor the quiver  
in the voice she'd steady, leaning/ into a pot of bones on the stove ...

... Only the landscape of her body - splintered  
clavicle, pierced temporal - her thin bones  
settling a bit each day, the way all things do.

The Poet Laureate understands that many Americans think of poetry as overly complex, unclear, and self-involved. Growing up, she says, she did too.

"I couldn't enter the world of the poem and find myself inside of it. But then there was a particular poem that spoke to me at some point in my life and I

realized it was just about finding the right poems.”

For Trethewey, the “right poem” was W.H. Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts.”

Auden talks about the way grief is so overpowering for mourners, while the world moves on without thought to the tragedy.

But Trethewey says everyone must find their own “right poem.”

“What poem is going to move you may not be the same one that moves me, but I am convinced that there is something out there for all of us that can make us love poetry. Sometimes we can read a poem about something that is nothing like anything we’ve experienced. And yet in there, the emotional strength of the poem is what connects us...the place of empathy.”

Natasha Trethewey is the first Poet Laureate in almost 30 years to spend part of her term working out of the Poets Room. This is a richly decorated office within the Library of Congress’ Poetry and Literature Center in Washington, D.C. Trethewey says she has been stirred by the beauty of the Library as a people’s house of knowledge. And she enjoys having a chance to persuade others to discover the magic and the mystery of poetry.

That’s all for As It Is, I’m June Simms in Washington. Thanks for spending time with us today. For questions or comments about our show, email us at



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VOA World News is coming up at the top of the hour, Universal Time.

Kelly Jean Kelly returns tomorrow with more As It Is. And I'll meet you back here same time next week.

Enjoy the rest of your day!