

## U.S. Poet Laureate in Wilmington Saturday

### On Poetry

Written by

JoAnn Balingit

Filed Under: [Life](#)

March 31, 2013



*U.S. poet laureate Natasha Trethewey, whose writings often deal with race in America, will do a reading in Delaware on Saturday.*

“When I start to write, I’m not a guide or teacher; I’m not even a poet. I’m a person far out at sea, and the poem is a raft made of whatever floats past in the water.” That is a quote by Jane Hirshfield about writing poetry.

I like “the poem is a raft” – in my own writing I see how a poem can gather up questions like pieces of driftwood, to allow the creative mind to build understanding out of uncertainty.

Sometimes this new understanding is a lifeboat, sturdy enough to get a person to shore—the writer, the reader. Other times the poem offers a small life preserver, just enough flotation to reach the next vital question.

Trying always to grasp the next life-saving question is what I see in the work of U.S. poet laureate, Natasha Trethewey. Her writings often deal with race in America. She writes from a deeply personal knowledge, and also from a knowledge of our wide and troubled communal sea.

Trethewey, born in Gulfport, Mississippi in 1966, explores her own interracial roots in self-portraits of the poet with her black mother and her white father. And as a student of the past, she ties her personal raft to the much larger ship of history. She writes poems that meditate on our complicated cultural struggles with colonization, race, slavery, prejudice, and the story of white supremacy.

Natasha Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize-winning third collection of poems, "Native Guard" (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), takes its title from the almost-forgotten regiment of African American soldiers who stood watch over Confederate prisoners of war on Ship Island, Mississippi. Although the Confederate dead were commemorated with a plaque inside the fort on Ship Island, the men of the Native Guard were ignored. This April 14, when a historical marker is dedicated to the Native Guard at Jones Park in Gulfport, Mississippi—Natasha Trethewey's hometown across the sound from Ship Island—their lives will be remembered. The poet will be a guest of honor.

Poems in Trethewey's latest collection, "Thrall" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), explore the ideas of the "taint" of black blood and of pre-determined racial standings illustrated in the "Book of Castas." In colonial Mexico, these illustrations recorded mixed-race marriages and the children from these unions. Many poems in *Thrall* reflect on the paintings of colonial mixed-raced families, and the poet's own troubled memories from girlhood and family life.

After hearing Natasha Trethewey's poetry, Librarian of Congress James Billington said that he was "immediately struck by [how] she intermixes her story with the historical story in a way that takes you deep into the human tragedy of it." Last June, Billington appointed Natasha Trethewey U.S. Poet Laureate for 2012-2013.

"Help, 1968" is a good example of how Trethewey intermixes the personal and the historical, and also shows her fondness for basing a poem on an image, in this case a photograph from "The Americans" by Robert Frank.

## 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 tiny furrow in 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 Trethewey (part 3 of the poem, "The Americans")

"Help, 1968" is reprinted with permission from *Thrall* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). Read more about Natasha Trethewey at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)

### **IF YOU GO**

**"University of Delaware Emancipation Symposium"**

Saturday, April 6, 12:30 - 4:30 p.m.

Delaware Historical Society's Delaware History Museum

504 N. Market St., Wilmington, DE, in the Copeland Room

A symposium commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In addition to talks by historians on the global dimensions of emancipation and the legacies of emancipation in Delaware, the symposium will feature a reading by **U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey**. A reception next door in Wilmington's historic Town Hall will follow. The program is free, with registration at [www.udconnection.com/Events](http://www.udconnection.com/Events)

**JoAnn Balingit is Delaware's poet laureate. Her latest book is “Words for House Story” (WordTech Editions, forthcoming 2013). She writes “On Poetry” to celebrate National Poetry Month. For information on her readings and workshops: <http://joannbalingit.org>.**