

Poet in Profile: Natasha Trethewey

By Emily Leithauser



Image 1: Natasha Trethewey

Arts and Sciences, she is Robert W. Woodruff Professor of English and Creative Writing at Emory University.

Poet Reflection – At the Memory Center by Natasha Trethewey

As part of the PBS NewsHour special series, “Where Poetry Lives,” Trethewey visited the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project in Brooklyn. Working with individuals with dementia, this international program creatively uses language and poetry to stimulate memory.

Natasha Trethewey served two terms as the 19th Poet Laureate of the United States (2012- 2014). She is the author of four collections of poetry, *Domestic Work* (2000), *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2002), *Native Guard* (2006)—for which she was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize—and, most recently, *Thrall* (2012). Her book of non-fiction, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, appeared in 2010. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Beinecke Library at Yale, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard. A fellow of the American Academy of

Often as a poet I find that I am somewhat outside an experience I want to hold onto, consciously taking mental notes or writing them down in my journal—for fear that I will forget. It’s not unlike being on a trip and taking pictures, your face behind a camera the whole time—the entire experience mediated by a lens. But a few weeks ago at the New York Memory Center shooting a segment for the PBS NewsHour’s Poetry Series, instead of holding a camera or a pen, I was holding the hands of children as we walked toward the room where we’d meet adults living with memory loss. Or I was holding the hands of the adults with memory loss as we met and greeted each

other, and then again as we said goodbye. It was the kind of being present in which you are immediately able to recall all of the names of the people you encounter, a kind of fellowship rooted in a profound human interaction— all of it that day facilitated by poetry.

While I was there I did not think, “I want to remember this,” and yet perhaps I was in a heightened state of recalling so much because I was aware that some of them would not. Some had the kind of memory loss that meant they could recall their childhoods, their distant pasts, former lives with deceased husbands or wives, but not what had happened the day or even moments before. Memory loss takes many forms. But I could hear in their repetitions—phrases uttered again and again—the anaphora of poetry, one of the techniques a poet might use along with cadence and rhyme to make the language memorable.

I could see in some of them the stages my great-aunt Sugar had gone through during the ten years that she lived with Alzheimer’s disease. Before she was too ill to continue to speak she began to talk only in the cadences of the psalms we’d recited in church—some of the first poems I ever learned. She had taught them to me along with the rest of the children in my Sunday school group—recitations to present to the adults during special programs. At the Memory Center, working first with the children and poet Gary Glazner, practicing to recite the poems for the adults with memory loss, I was reminded of my own childhood.

The children in the Memory Center seemed delighted, as children often are, simply to speak the lines of the poems we used. And so did many of the adults who were able still to speak. A woman named Evadene called the children’s exuberance a lovely “stage of life.” I imagine that

so many of us have had such experiences as children: from nursery rhymes we learn at home or in school, to sacred poems of religious ceremony, our grasp of language has a beginning in poetry. To see it used at a very different stage of life, and to such effect, was deeply moving.

My own journey in becoming a poet began with memory—with the need to record and hold on to what was being lost. One of my earliest poems, “Give and Take,” was about my Aunt Sugar, how I was losing her to *her* memory loss. It seems fitting then that we began the journey to highlight the way poetry matters in the lives of countless Americans at the memory center, with people nearer to the end of their lives for whom memory is ever more essential.

Poem – “Give and Take” by Natasha Trethewey

I come here once a month to dig
my fingers into your head, grease
your scalp, put you in plaits for ease—
old woman, I remember

the photograph you used to pull out;
Chicago, 1957, lab coat on,
you are bent over test tubes
adding substance to substance.

I imagine you before the flame
taking something out, distilling
light from volatile darkness,
and handing it over. You had begun

to hand over everything else, piece
by piece, each time I visited.
The trinket shelf grew empty
in the corner. I walked away

with the tiny mortar and pestle,
the cracked figurine, the nativity
under glass. Then we took
what you chose not to give:

all the knives in the house,
your hot plate and stove. Still,
you cooked on the radiator, forgot,
and singed your matted wig.

Now your lab coat is an open frock,
easy for the Dixie White House staff
who wipe and clean your bony back.
And every time I see you,

you're gathering stuff up, stashing it
in your pockets, in the elastic
waist of your panties, even
the corners of your mouth.

Trethewey, N. "Give and Take." In: *Domestic Work: Poems*. Minneapolis: GrayWolf Press, 2000: p.50.

Watch [Natasha Trethewey reading Give and Take, March 10, 2015](#)

Poem Analysis – “Give and Take” by Emily Leithauser

The title of this poem establishes giving and taking as a metaphor for human relationships and for the progression of Alzheimer’s disease. Recording the particular struggle of her aunt, a former scientist, Trethewey also chronicles her experience as family member, poet, and caregiver. The other caregivers include, of course, those at the institution, the stewards responsible for Aunt Sugar’s daily life. In addition to a giver, the poet is also a receiver of her aunt’s belongings and memories. The disease is the biggest “taker” in the poem, and takes without the elderly woman’s consent. But there are many gifts she gives willingly, including those to science. Ultimately, Aunt Sugar bequeaths the gifts of her memories and her memory to her niece. Memory, here, operates at the level of science—Alzheimer’s results in memory loss—and in poetic terms, as poetry often seeks to remember and preserve.

In addition to playing off the evolving connotations of giving and taking, the poet uses evolving imagery to mark her aunt’s mental deterioration. In the first stanza, the poet comes to the institution, which we learn she does monthly, to massage and braid her aunt’s head and hair. The rhyme of “grease” with “ease” mimics the ease of intimacy even in the most trying and saddening of situations. Later, in the sixth stanza, we see a flashback of the aunt while she was still independent, back when she had a “matted wig.” Significantly, however, we learn that she is becoming unable to care for herself, as represented by the metaphor of her “singed” wig.

In the second stanza, we are introduced to another evolving image, that of the “lab coat,” which becomes an “open frock” later in the poem when the aunt’s

Alzheimer's has progressed. The aunt, in a "lab coat," is "adding substance to substance." This chemical metaphor echoes elegantly the addition of the poet's memories to her aunt's, while also suggesting that the aunt's life used to consist of substance, which has gradually been taken away from her. The unspoken irony here is that science, for all of its substance, has yet to find a cure for Alzheimer's.

In the third stanza, we are no longer in the concrete, clinical world of "test tubes" and "substances," but in an almost mystical one. The science becomes a kind of magical alchemy, as the aunt is "distilling / light from volatile darkness." Alzheimer's is also figured as a kind of darkness from which it becomes increasingly hard to distill light. The image of the lab, like a fading memory, has become nebulous.

And just as the science is changing, so is the aunt. The line break after "begun" creates an element of surprise. The phrase "You had begun" suggests promise. But what the aunt has "begun" to do is to lose control over her mind, giving away her material objects first, as "The trinket shelf grew empty / in the corner." The stanza break after "I walked away" is also suggestive, because we associate walking away with abandonment. But Trethewey has not abandoned her aunt, even if the aunt experiences her memory loss as a kind of abandonment.

The poem hinges on the moment when the aunt cannot choose to give anymore. The flame from the lab is re-conjured into the dangers of the "hot plate," the "stove," and the "radiator." And what the aunt can choose to take is not what she would have wanted when her mind was clearer, as she "gather[s] stuff up, / stashing it" everywhere, so that more is not taken from her. She even stashes belongings in her "mouth," implying not only that she wants to consume her possessions and her past as a

way of maintaining them, but also that she has things to say she cannot verbalize. Ending the poem on the word "mouth" suggests that the aunt is communicating in her own way. It is for the poet to help her speak.

Where Poetry Lives Project

Natasha Trethewey worked with Jeffrey Brown on a special poetry series developed by PBS NewsHour called *Where Poetry Lives*. The series was about exploring issues in American life through a lens of poetry and literature.

About the Author



Emily Leithauser's poetry and translations have appeared in *Measure*, *Southwest Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Unsplendid*, and *Literary Imagination*, among other journals. Her scholarship has appeared in *The Hopkins Review* and is forthcoming from *The Global South*. She is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Emory University, where she is also a visiting instructor in the Creative Writing Program. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia.