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Shawna N. Meers-Ernst
University of North Georgia

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Dreams of Reconciliation in Native Guard

Acknowledgments

Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* explores the relationships between history, personal and public, and her attempts to reconcile herself to them and with them. In the three works to be discussed, Trethewey writes of dreams. The dreams serve differing functions for the author. As will be shown, Trethewey confronts, or is confronted by, concerns regarding her own history with her mother's death in addition to a national historical narrative where her ancestors remain on the periphery. In the dreams she experiences various types of reconciliation whether in the comprehension of her mother's death in "Myth" or the juxtaposition of real and perceived history in "Pilgrimage" or finally the position she represents as a biracial Southerner in "Pastoral." The above poems are taken from each of the three parts of *Native Guard* and are representative of the collection.

The palindrome "Myth" depicts the endless cycle the author endures as she grieves the loss of someone; Trethewey noted in an interview with Pearl McHaney that the poem is in fact about her mother. Each line of the poem is repeated as it is mirrored upon itself. The third stanza ends with "Again and again, this constant forsaking" (Trethewey 9)¹ and the fourth stanza begins with "Again and again, this constant forsaking" (Trethewey 10). This pattern is utilized throughout the work. Her use of a continuous present tense in the entirety of the poem also reinforces the ongoing and current cycle. Each of the six stanzas is comprised of three lines where every other line ends with the morpheme 'ing'. Here again, the emphasis on the perpetual cycle is supported by repetition.

The first three stanzas utilize less complicated punctuation and the flow of the sentences is different from that of the last half of the poem. The first line "I was asleep while you were dying" is presented in a very matter-of-fact manner (Trethewey 1). The line right away informs the reader that the author has suffered a loss and was not granted the luxury of attendance or goodbye. The same line is also found in the last stanza as it closes out the entirety of the poem. These two lines represent a personal history for the author. They demonstrate that her thoughts or dreams begin and end with the same moment, a moment that the author expresses as if repenting or confessing. The second stanza invokes the myth by incorporating Erebus. Erebus, the dark thoroughfare through which a deceased person passes, serves as the meeting place between mother and daughter in the reoccurring dreams. In the third stanza the author wakes again to the realization that her mother is gone.

The asterisk that divides the two parts serves as the demarcation or a necessary break in the stanzas to denote an emphasis on a lack of a turning point.

¹ Line numbers are not noted in the actual text of *Native Guard* but I have formatted my paper to reference implied line numbers in order to make referring to them more easily navigated for the reader.

The remainder of the poem is a reverse of the first three stanzas with alterations in punctuation that modify the sentences. Syntax has also changed in a few places as well while changing up the pace and rhythm of the work. Line thirteen reads “But in dreams you live” (Trethewey 13) where in lines five and six it read “You’ll be dead again tomorrow/but in dreams you live” (Trethewey 5-6). The alterations expose some variant of thought and process that exist in an otherwise cyclical and repetitive grieving process as the author attempts to reconcile her dreams with an unwanted reality.

In the fifth stanza the invocation of Erebus has changed in meaning and purpose. Line fifteen explicates Erebus is the place that exists somewhere between the author’s dreaming and waking where possibly she can still find her mother. The line reads “The Erebus I keep you in -still trying- /I make between my slumber and my waking” (Trethewey 15-16). An element of guilt seeps through the verbiage as she denotes her inability to let go of her mother and instead holds her hostage in her own adaptation of Erebus. An additional interpretation is the author may be alluding to the idea that she still tries to lead her mother out of the Erebus as the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice inform us but because of “constant forsaking” she is unable to (Trethewey 10).

The organization and format of this work play integral roles in elucidating the author’s unwavering anguish as she reawakens to the fact that she has lost someone dear to her. Mirroring the sections furthers the reader’s understanding of the author’s pain by showing that it is inescapable. She experiences an altered state in her dreams, a place where her mother is not dead, but while in the realm before wakefulness she hopes to bring her mother with her, only to find that she cannot. In “Myth” the dream serves as a form of resistance as the author tries to reconcile herself to the reality that her mother is no longer living.

“Pilgrimage” takes the reader to the venerated site of the battle of Vicksburg in Mississippi as Trethewey continues to explore memory. In this poem she utilizes a series of eighteen couplets with random enjambment. Trethewey describes the Mississippi River as “a graveyard for skeletons of sunken riverboats” (Trethewey 2-3). Right away the reader becomes aware that this is a place of death. She notes the geography of the river: “here, the river changed its course, turning away from the city as one turns, forgetting, from the past” (Trethewey 4-6). The unwavering movement of the river easily changes landscapes as it moves silt from one location to another. The river can erase and rewrite its story through its perpetual motion. Like the river, memory is fluid. Memory relies on the beholder. It is easily manipulated and can resemble a mighty river as it washes over the past and muddies the truth. The course of the river “turning away from the city” denotes Trethewey’s understanding that people turn away from the truth of the past (Trethewey 5). Here the river is a literal representation of a crossing as well. Union soldiers crossed the Mississippi and

pushed the Confederate soldiers back to a defensive position. In terms of memory, the Mississippi represents a cleaving, as thousands of Confederate soldiers died fighting for a state's right to preserve slavery, but are still venerated as they "stand up in stone, white marble, on Confederate Avenue" (Trethewey 10-11). Her description of the statues is important. She notes their posture, their color, and the material they are made of. The statues stand, they are white, and made of marble. Like the telling of history the statues are formed, molded, and hardened. They remain white as they weather storms. Much of the history that Trethewey confronts is a white history that is fermented in the Southern memory and with the passage of time still only tells one story, the story of white men. This form of history is often resisted by Trethewey as she does not support the memorializing of a social hierarchy in granite (Ramsey 131). The fluid motion of the river and the static nature of the statues present a contradiction, as one is ever-changing while the other is a permanent icon.

Trethewey addresses the fear experienced by Vicksburg's citizens in the next few stanzas of her poem. She notes the "web of caves" that were dug out by citizens in hopes to survive the siege and how "they must have seemed like catacombs" (Trethewey 12-13). She refers to a "woman sitting in her parlor, candlelit, underground" as she is "writing herself into history" and she asks "*what is to become of all the living things in this place*" (Trethewey 14-18). The woman who penned the latter quote is Emma Balfour who is well-known in Civil War studies. Balfour offered first-hand information on the terror of the day. She was a citizen of Vicksburg and remained in her home for much of the battle before escaping to the caves amidst the falling of mortars. She witnessed the soldiers pouring into the town center and the macabre acts of war. What is notable though is Trethewey's admonition that the woman was "writing herself into history" as that is a common struggle throughout *Native Guard*. Trethewey often confronts the juxtaposition of the common historical narrative as it does, or does not, relate to her own. As one reads these stanzas it is unknown if Trethewey is relying on an uninformed reader or if by italicizing the borrowed line she is encouraging the reader to educate oneself.

The remaining stanzas further expound on the pilgrimage to Vicksburg. Tourists flock to the site as if it is holy. They weave in and out of the remnants while viewing history as it is "preserved under glass" (Trethewey 26). The glass, although seemingly clear, keeps the tourists from interacting with the relics as they continue to be confounded by the historical narrative. The clothing on display seems "so much smaller than our own, as if those who wore them were only children" (Trethewey 26-28). The artifacts betray the actuality of the soldiers and citizens. The smallness further confuses the story as it is easy to equate the people who wore them as childlike in their comprehension of the events that surrounded them. Trethewey notes that "the whole city is a grave" as

“the brochure in my room calls this a living history” (Trethewey 19, 31-32). Again we see the contradiction of what is written, the brochure, and what is experienced, the river as a graveyard.

The closing of the poem references a dream as the “ghost of history lies down beside me, rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm” (Trethewey 36-37). Trethewey acknowledges the shadowy ephemeral nature of a history that still suffocates her while also excluding her. The feeling of suffocation is due to the responsibility she feels to right what is wrong with the known history of the South (Cenzo 29). She does not find peace in her dream and she is unable to resist the oppressive silence of a continued selective history. The space around her is invaded by the same forces that push the story of her ancestors into the shadows.

“Pastoral” opens part three of *Native Guard*. Here again Trethewey writes of a dream. She offers that “in the dream, I am with the Fugitive Poets” (Trethewey 1-2). The title of the poem and the inclusion of the Fugitive Poets invoke an agrarian theme to the poem. Fugitive poets often defended the values of an agrarian South, which would also have included slavery. The success of Southern agriculture was tightly interwoven with the presence of slave labor. Trethewey’s mention of these poets reflects the complexity of her relationships to, and with, her art, her race, her place of birth, and her history. Poems that evoke a pastoral landscape are typified as rural but this poem’s landscape is the “skyline of Atlanta hidden by the photographer’s backdrop – a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows” (Trethewey 3-5). Trethewey, who has utilized photos in other works, employs subterfuge to ensconce the setting of “Pastoral” in a rural environment. Photographs, often depicted as concrete evidence, again represent an easily manipulated and forced story. She imagines the sounds of cows in the printed backdrop as a “lowing, a chant that sounds like, no, no” (Trethewey 6). Instead the ambient sounds emulate from “the drone of bulldozers” (Trethewey 9-10). The photographer prods his subjects to “[S]ay ‘race’” as he snaps the photo as if to reify Trethewey’s differences (Trethewey 11). She finds herself “in blackface again when the flash freezes us” (Trethewey 12). This line evokes an array of thoughts from the reader. Minstrel shows, where white men dressed as black men by painting their faces, were a common form of entertainment in the late nineteenth century. The blackface comedians often portrayed black people as unintelligent, lazy, or incapable. The insertion of blackface in the above line elucidates on Trethewey’s wavering confidence as a biracial woman. In the next line she is more assertive as she offers “[M]y father’s white, I tell them, and rural” (Trethewey 13).

The poems in *Native Guard* demonstrate the process by which Trethewey tries to reconcile her place in Southern History. The dream in this poem though seems to give the author a stronger voice, a voice filled with resistance. She leaves the reader to ponder the juxtaposition of being black and Southern in the

final line, “*You don’t hate the South? They ask. You don’t hate it?*” (Trethewey 14). These lines expose her contradictory feelings about being Southern and the nature of the history that is found in the South (Cenzo 40). The lines are more confrontational than in the previous poems and dreams. She is more self-assured as she describes her father’s race.

Throughout the works in *Native Guard* Trethewey touches on the ambiguous nature of memory and willful forgetting. She experiences the agony of realizing her mother’s death again and again as she dreams of her and fights against that memory when she wakes. Dreaming of her mother serves as a potential catalyst for progression in her very personal grieving process. In her dream she attempts to work through the guilt of not attending her mother’s death while ascertaining that she was not afforded a choice, just as she cannot choose to bring her mother out of the Erebus and back with her into waking. She takes on the collective memory of Southern history in “Pilgrimage” and “Pastoral” as she also tries to reconcile her own feelings. Her dreams in these poems offer a different perspective. In “Pilgrimage” the author is ‘suffocated’ by the oppression of a lack of inclusivity in historical memory while in “Pastoral” she experiences a more aggressive assertion that she is biracial and perhaps the problem with identity is not something that she personally struggles with, but is a struggle for others as they do not know what category to place her in. Trethewey’s work in this collection of poems shows the reader how difficult it is to gain an identity in a culture that celebrates white achievement.

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