

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 4

Natasha Trethewey and Rosanne Cash

Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry & Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

In December 2013, singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash completed a three-day special residency at the Library of Congress. After two nights of concerts in the Coolidge Auditorium, she ended her residency in a more intimate setting—she joined Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey in a conversation about the power of lyric language, the intersections of songwriting and poetry, and the artistic influence of their fathers—Johnny Cash and Eric Trethewey.

Later on in the conversation, Natasha and Rosanne were both asked to share a favorite example of lyric language in poem and song—Natasha played a recording of “The L&N Don’t Stop Here Anymore” by June Carter Cash, and Rosanne read the Philip Larkin poem, “An Arundel Tomb.”

On today’s episode, we’ll listen to the beginning of this hour-long conversation, but first, let’s go behind the scenes of the event with Natasha Trethewey. A few months ago, Rob Casper, the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, visited Natasha in Illinois, and they spent some time reminiscing about that event with Rosanne Cash almost five years ago.

Here they are.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Nathasha Trethewey

Rob Casper: This is Rob Casper and I’m in the office of Natasha Trethewey, our 19th Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, up in Evanston, Illinois. I’m here to talk to her about her December 2013 event with Rosanne Cash. So, Natasha, I want to start by just asking what it was like to meet Rosanne, and what were your first impressions?

Natasha Trethewey: Well, it was wonderful meeting Rosanne, and I’m a fan, so getting to talk with her in person about influence—because we both had fathers who do the same thing that we did, and we learned a lot from them. She had just finished working on her collection of the one hundred songs that she’d learned from her father that she needed to know, and I could’ve made a list like that from what my father told me. She’s someone who is deeply interested in poetry, which was also thrilling to see, and she’s quite warm and personable. I felt like I had known her a long time when I met her.

RC: It was wild, because we didn’t spend that much time with her before the event. I think we were up in the office just for 20 minutes or a half an hour and then we went downstairs and there you go—we started this moderated discussion. How do you think things progressed with her, this person you just met who you admire deeply and whose father you admire deeply?

NT: And whose father my father admired deeply, and whose songs my father would play on his guitar! I really enjoyed the conversation. I particularly liked the moment where we both presented and talked about; she chose a poem that she wanted to talk about, and I chose a song that I wanted to talk about. And I would've chosen "The L&N Don't Stop Here Anymore," as June Carter Cash sang it, even if I weren't meeting with Rosanne. But getting to be there and talk about that, and to talk about poetry with her, was like an experience unlike any I'd ever had before.

RC: Was it one of the more unusual experiences you had as poet laureate?

NT: Yeah, I think so. I'd never had the chance to sit down with someone who is a singer-songwriter like that—who cares as much about the song as put to music as she does about the song as it appears on the page in a poem. Since then I've seen her every couple of years, because she and I are on the panel with Salman Rushdie and a few other folks to choose the PEN Awards in American songwriting. So I've kind of had to learn more about the art of songwriting and the poetry of songwriting in order to be on that panel. First time I walked into that room, I said, "Oh, I feel really out of my depth," and she said, "Nah."

RC: I imagine that the conversation we had paved the way for that sense of being comfortable with her, and talking with her, and thinking about the relationship between songwriting and poetry and presenting it as such with this award.

What I'm interested in is in thinking about what it means to be a poet, and connecting to these other art forms, and the fact that you're so comfortable with, and so well-known for, your work as an ekphrastic poet. Does that kind of connection to visual art compare in any way to the connection you felt during the course of our conversation between poetry and song lyrics?

NT: Yeah, I think that there's a way that not only the lyrics of the song but also the music itself can open a pathway for you to consider other ideas about the way you might be feeling about a particular work. For example, the qualities of tone, the depths of meaning that you can get in a song—not just from the words, but also what the music is doing at the same time. A good example for me is Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam," because on the one hand you have what the lyrics are saying— "Everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam/Alabama made me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest"—so you have these words that are being sung, but then you also have this music that's sort of chugging along like a show tune, a little train going by, that's much peppier than what's being said, and I think it's in the intersection between those two things that I find the possibilities of a poem emerging and asking me to see two different registers at one time. It's the way in a poem that there's always something in the foreground and something in the background, trying to bridge the distance between those two. Between those words, between that music, there's some other path that I have to try to find my way into.

RC: Yeah, it was interesting—looking over the conversation and remembering how you talked about your sense of musicality as a poet, and how that's something you work very hard to create in the poems, but it sort of pervades them without being explicit. And it's interesting as a contrast to at one point we were talking about the Rolling Stones...what was that song? It's just a shot away...what's that song? I can't think of the song! Anyway, we were talking about the Rolling Stones song, and Rosanne Cash was

saying without that backbeat, you know, there's not much there. "Gimme Shelter," we're talking about "Gimme Shelter." And so I'm suddenly realizing that you are always implicitly, or in subtler ways, pushing a kind of backbeat, pushing a kind of rhythm that you know poems can do, but you don't want that to take over in the way that you're listening to a song, you can't help listen to a song especially one with a backbeat you can't help but get caught up in how the music itself propels the lyrics forward.

NT: Yeah, you know, when I'm working on a poem, I do tend to focus on visual imagery primarily, and that goes back to you talking about my interest in ekphrasis because I like looking at an image and starting from there to see what other kinds of thinking it will generate. But at the same time, of course, I'm always tapping my foot and I'm not thinking about that. One time somebody came up to me after a reading and said that she was a musician and a composer, and she worked on the organ, and she said that the whole time I was reading I was tapping my foot like the way you play the pedals on a piano or an organ—and that meant I was switching feet and I was doing certain things on downbeats, and on other ones—and it's sort of, it's an unconscious thing that I'm doing, because I can focus on image but there's a way you feel the music, and it's there in your body. And that's why when I'm writing poetry I often put on some music that might help me enter the space of the poem in a different way.

RC: That's interesting. Do you ever feel like you put on music and start to write, and then you have to switch it up because you're going in a different direction than the music is taking you?

NT: I think it probably falls away at some point.

RC: One last question: as I said in my intro for this event, this wasn't the first time a poet laureate had a kind of high-profile conversation with a noteworthy singer-songwriter—Ted Kooser had done a similar thing with John Prine many years before—but I wonder, is that the kind of work that a poet laureate should be doing? Connecting poetry to other art forms, and talking about how poetry is really in conversation with the world in a bigger way? As opposed to saying, "Okay, poems are the thing we need to read above all else, I'm going to go out there and cheerlead for poetry alone."

NT: No, I absolutely think that it shouldn't be just poetry, that poets should be in conversation with other artists, other practitioners of various arts, too. It creates a bigger audience for all of us, for the arts in general. They just remounted the theatrical installation of my *Native Guard*, at the Atlanta History Center—here it is being performed by these actors, with also a vocalist and a composer, and what I've discovered is that there's this whole other audience who might not have come to poetry but they're coming through the theater, so it creates a bigger audience for the poetry, but I think they're putting people who are going because they knew the poetry, which creates another bigger audience for this theater company. So I think that those conversations that help show people that they have ways into art forms that they didn't think that they did is exactly what we should be doing.

RC: Okay, and that's exactly where we should be ending.

Webcast Intro

Many thanks to Natasha and Rob for that conversation, the perfect preface to this 2013 event with Rosanne Cash. Right now, we'll listen to some segments from the first half of the conversation. To watch

or hear the latter half, which includes the discussion of “The L&N Don’t Stop Here Anymore” and “An Arundel Tomb,” make sure to catch the full webcast on the Library’s website. Okay, here we go.

Webcast Clip 1 (from “Conversation with Rosanne Cash and Natasha Trethewey”)

Rob Casper: So, my first question is, both of you have fathers who are practitioners of your art. Given that, what might the two of you already know about each other and what might you want to know?

Natasha Trethewey: Hmm, that's pretty good Rob. Well, I must say that I was really taken with the interview that you did with Terry Gross about the list. And of course, if you—if any of you in the audience heard it then, you know that Rosanne was talking about this list of 100 songs that her father told her she needed to know right, to be—

Rosanne Cash: Yeah.

Natasha Trethewey: —a singer-songwriter. And I remember thinking that there was a similarity but also something that was very different in the way that you were describing what your father did for you in that instance. I remembered that I had always asked my father for those kinds of things. My father was my first professor of creative writing when I went to graduate school, so I was in his class. And so, I was getting you know that kind of thing from him in class, but what it really reminded me of was at that point when I was in graduate school I knew I wanted to be a poet. My father and I were in New Orleans and we were walking down the street in the quarter and we stopped in front of a doorway, because we could hear the lovely voice of a singer you know coming out of the doors. And I kind of listened for a moment and then said very wistfully, oh I wish I could sing. And my father said to me how are you going to be a poet if you can't sing? And for that moment I was pretty devastated. I still can't sing, but I think I sort of steeled myself to figure out a way to make my poems like song.

Rosanne Cash: That's interesting, because I strive to make my songs through lyrics be able to stand alone on the page without their melody, so.

Natasha Trethewey: We're doing the same thing.

Rosanne Cash: I think so.

Natasha Trethewey: But, you could probably sing my poems and I could not—I could say your songs.

Rosanne Cash: Well—

Natasha Trethewey: Because you wouldn't want me to sing them, but I—

Rosanne Cash: I don't know. My songs coming from you might sound kind of like dah dut dah dut dah dut dah, you know... I—you stick with your poems. But, what I—what interests me about that and I hadn't really thought about it in this way about what fathers give to their daughters is that there is a certain gentleness and ease in what a father gives a daughter. There's not that sense of urgency or kind of proprietorship that fathers have with sons to be like them. So, for me anyway what my father gave me was with complete freedom and generosity.

Natasha Trethewey: Well, I think I also never felt pressured to do what my father does.

Rosanne Cash: Yeah.

Natasha Trethewey: But, I wanted to do it too.

Rosanne Cash: Same here.

Natasha Trethewey: And I think it is that kind of tenderness or gentleness that you're talking about. And the ways that he sort of instilled the importance of poetry in me. On long trips my father would say, "If you get bored why don't you write a poem about it." So, it was something I was always doing.

Rosanne Cash: That's so smart of him. [laughter] That's interesting. My father passed on a love of literature and poetry to me as well in songs, of course. But, he liked really I guess what you would call folk-art po—poem—poets. They were very simple. There was a poem—a poet named Will Carlton and he wrote about rural life and a preacher who went to the Holy land and then talked about it endlessly until he bored his congregation. You know his poems would be about these very small pictures of rural life and I used to read those poems to him in the last few years of his life.

Natasha Trethewey: Yea. Well, my father used to dream of being a country singer.

Rosanne Cash: [laughter] That is so funny.

Natasha Trethewey: I mean there was a point I remember in his life where you know he you know had a couple of glasses of wine and said—came in and said "I'm going to Nashville honey." You know way after you might think of someone making that journey to Nashville to make a career. But, he—I think it—on one of those nights I used to sit out on his porch in the country and he tried to teach me to play the guitar.

Rosanne Cash: Did he play guitar?

Natasha Trethewey: He does, yeah.

Rosanne Cash: Yeah.

Natasha Trethewey: He plays the guitar and you know he'd be singing some Lead Belly song and you know trying to teach me. And I could never do it. But, we both wrote poems about that night. He finished his and published it. The poem of mine, "Guitar Lesson," that I tried writing has never been one that I have felt was finished, successful enough to go out in the world. But, I've been trying to write about him trying to teach me that.

Rosanne Cash: But, in a way you did, because your poetry has an element of the blues in it. You know so maybe you—

Natasha Trethewey: It worked its way in.

Rosanne Cash: It worked its way in. I think so. I mean to me it does. That kind of southern swampy dark edged—oh, love it.

Natasha Trethewey: Yeah.

Rosanne Cash: Yeah. [laughter]

Rob Casper: Well, I'm interested in talking about the power and tradition. And one thing I realized in referencing the list is what it must be like for a musician to be inspired, a songwriter to be inspired to write her own songs as opposed to playing songs that you know and have been passed down and you find a way musically to, to—and have it differently. And I wondered if there is a parallel in that for poets too? That kind of need to think through, feel through these, these great songs, these great poems and then also sort of juxtapose that with the poems and the songs that you write yourself.

Rosanne Cash: Well, it certainly provides a standard for the kind of songs you want to write. And I used to write down the lyrics. Like I would read the lyric on a page of what I thought was a great song and then I would rewrite it for myself to dismantle it and figure out why it worked. Why? What made that a great song? You know just breaking down the rhyme scheme, how a pattern would repeat or an image that showed up in the first verse would then tie up the song at the end of the last verse. Why was that so powerful? And then, you know as someone who wanted to be a songwriter to try to replicate that in my own writing in steel as quietly as I could, you know.

Natasha Trethewey: Yeah. That was something I wanted to ask you about so I'm glad you asked her Rob, because you also talked about when you did inhabit those songs on the list and what it meant for you to sing songs that you hadn't written. And I was thinking about how—I know that you also write fiction and that fiction writers will often give an assignment to students to actually just copy, write out a story in longhand that someone else has already written to sort of feel it in the body and in—you know in your hand writing it. And I was thinking about how I'd never done that, but I use imitation all the time for myself and with my students and it's exactly what you say. When you're imitating a poem line by line, I'm looking at the pattern of imagery in the syntax and the caesuras in the poem and how it does what it does. And I feel like when my students do that, because at first they're a little nervous about imitation.

Roseanne Cash: Um huh.

Natasha Trethewey: Because it—they think it means copying. And I have to assure them that it's just like form and whatever material they have to pour into the form will be different. But, once they do it they often write some of the best poems. And I think some of—you know some of the poems I've been happiest with are poems of mine that are deeply influenced by—

Rosanne Cash: Yeah.

Natasha Trethewey: —the movement, the rhetorical and syntactical structure of a poem I loved.

Rosanne Cash: That—I find the very same thing and also as an adjunct to that I think it's really important to know the tradition you're writing in. If you don't know who wrote these kind of poems or who wrote these kind of songs that came before you, you know you're at sea. It's so—I can't—see I work with young songwriters sometimes, and I can't stand it if they're writing in a, you know, strict folk tradition and they haven't listened to any other folk songwriters. But, I was going to say something else about that, about imitation and inspiration, but it'll come back.

Webcast Clip 2 (from “Conversation with Rosanne Cash and Natasha Trethewey”)

Rob Casper: Let me ask you in a simple yes or no way. Do you think that, do you think that whether or not it's a sung ballad or it's a persona poem, you know a sequence of sonnets matters? Does that shift in form matter? Do they do something different for us?

Natasha Trethewey: Well . . . [pause] I suppose in both cases you want something to be memorable and rhyme or the musicality of song is what helps us to remember things and to make that story memorable. So, I don't know if that's what accounts for a particular difference whether it's the ballad or the persona poem, because I also think it's about voice as well that hearing the intimacy of a voice is also what helps us connect to a particular time and place.

Rosanne Cash: And let's not forget—I mean we're kind of talking about the lyric quality, but you know a lot of songs require a backbeat, you know. If you read the Rolling Stones "Gimme Shelter" on the page it's kind of cool, but you got to have that driving backbeat—

Rob Casper: Yeah, yeah.

Rosanne Cash: Or else it's not "Gimme Shelter" anymore.

Rob Casper: What's it like to read your, read your—we all love "Gimme Shelter." But, what's it like to read—

Rosanne Cash: [singing] Just a shot away.

Rob Casper: Yeah. I guess if you said “just a shot away” it doesn't really work the same way.

Rosanne Cash: Right.

Rob Casper: But, you read your song lyrics to yourself right and?

Rosanne Cash: Oh sure.

Rob Casper: And do you think—

Rosanne Cash: You mean when I'm editing or as I write?

Rob Casper: Um huh.

Rosanne Cash: Of course, yeah.

Rob Casper: And at what point do you start actually singing them?

Rosanne Cash: Well, now that's an interesting—that's—the question I think you're saying is which comes first music or lyrics. And the answer is both, because it comes in all different ways. Sometimes I have a complete lyric or a partial lyric yet it doesn't have a melody and the melody comes later. Sometimes I'm co-writing and somebody else is writing the music. Sometimes I have a melody with nothing to it and I go through reams of lyric ideas to get something or something sparks. You know I mean it—you know it happens a million different ways.

Natasha Trethewey: That's right.

Rosanne Cash: If it—if you knew how it was going to happen, if it was predictable it wouldn't be poetry and songwriting anymore. It would be something else.

Rob Casper: Natasha, do you, do you listen to yourself read poems? Do you ever record yourself reading poems? And do you always read the poems at some point in the process of writing them?

Natasha Trethewey: Oh, the whole time that I'm writing them. I don't think I could write them without hearing them and feeling them, you know. I'm tapping my feet as I write them and hearing and feeling the music in that way. But, of course, it's different. You know I'm thinking about how the struggle I think of trying to create a kind of musicality in poems. I mean this is something that you and I have talked about. Rob and I have talked about this and I'll just confess it. This feels very much like a confession. But, I feel like because I grew up loving the rhythm of syntax, I love sentences and I hear the rhythm of syntax. And yet, sometimes you can read a poem, a particular poet and be so focused on perhaps content or the way that imagery is used that the musicality might wash over you in such a way that you don't take notice of it, you know.

Well, I think T.S. Eliot talked about that, just that, you know, some poems we attend to the sense and let the sound wash over us. And in others we attend to the sound, the sonnet qualities and let the sense wash over us. And I think maybe, because I'm not musically inclined, you know, in some ways, like I couldn't sing when I heard that woman singing in New Orleans. I—I'm always drawn to attending to the sense, but feel the music when it's there. And so, you know, I'm very attentive with that with my own work. So it's always surprising to me if I, you know, allow myself a moment of reading a critic who doesn't realize how musical my poems are. There, I said it.

Rob Casper: Yeah.

Natasha Trethewey: And I think it's because maybe they're just attending to the sense, you know, the content.

Rosanne Cash: I think your poems are incredibly musical. I would say you're a great musician. [laughter]

[Webcast Clip 3 \(from “Conversation with Rosanne Cash and Natasha Trethewey”\)](#)

Rob Casper: Well, thank you to both of our wonderful guests on stage, Rosanne Cash, Natasha Trethewey.

[Applause]

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: Thank you for joining us on “From the Catbird Seat.” To learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress, visit us at loc.gov/poetry. You can watch or listen to the full events featured on today’s episode by going to loc.gov/discover, and clicking on “Video Webcasts.” We’ll be back next week for another episode. Stay tuned.