



Domestic Work: Poems

Natasha Trethewey

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Winner of the 2001 Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award

In this widely celebrated debut collection of poems, Natasha Trethewey draws moving domestic portraits of families, past and present, caught in the act of earning a living and managing their households. Small moments taken from a labor-filled day--and rendered here in graceful and readable verse--reveal the equally hard emotional work of memory and forgetting, the extraordinary difficulty of trying to live with or without someone.

Domestic Work: Poems Details

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From Reader Review Domestic Work: Poems for online ebook

Lori Gravley says

This is an extraordinary book, and I'm disappointed that the reviews on the back don't begin to hint at its complexity. The book is in four sections. The book is framed by first section and the last in which photographs, ephemera, and everyday objects are the focus. And linking these two sections are not just poems, but a narrative, a beautiful story from history, through ancestry and family, and into the now of the poetic voice of this work. It tells story of a family and of a young woman, balancing between the worlds of her foremothers and her own life on the edges, trying to come to terms with the everyday tragedies and the extraordinary losses of her life.

That this is a book about the speaker's life at the edges of that history, trying to make sense of it, is hinted at throughout the work, but most clearly denoted in the title of the final poem, "Limen."

The Domestic Work of the title, then, is the women's work--washing, sewing, cleaning--Trethewey describes and the domestic work of a young woman unraveling of the stitches that have made up her family story. The work of a writer, standing outside her life, just at the edges of it and history, trying to form it into a story that makes some sense.

Extraordinary.

Sara says

This is a book of poetry, and I don't think I've read one of those all the way through in more than a decade. This is Trethewey's first published book and I really enjoyed it. It made me think and it touched me. Not sure what else to say - poetry criticism being an even weaker point for me than prose criticism. The series that the title is drawn from is a particularly powerful group of poems following a woman (or a series of women?) through jobs from 1937 to 1970. All of the four parts of the book had great pieces, though.

Libby says

Each of the poems is like a little short story, some adding up to ongoing threads of her grandmother's life. In different poems, we see her leaving town with a man; while pregnant, waiting for him; then across the table from each other we see the first crack. She's back in her home town, jobs ranging from elevator operator, hair care, in a drapery factory (you have to read about what happens when her boss searches her purse), then sewing at home, styling her wig each day in case someone comes by. Then the poet's parents pregnant with her, crossing campus and reading from a slim volume of verse. (She must have been listening in utero.) Some are influenced by photos of African Americans taken in early 20th century.

All these poems are quite accessible, I recommend this book even to those who don't get poetry or think it has to be hard.

D'Argo Agathon says

I first read Tretheway a year ago, and I was not impressed. *Domestic Work*'s "obsession with the stereotypes of blackness," as I responded back then, "feels disingenuous and distanced." I faulted Tretheway's narrative voice for inserting clichés into the minds of these black-people-in-pictures; for example, I felt that, "'At the Owl Club' is meant to be a triumphant moment for the black man in America, but instead, it comes off as 'the black man' stereotype who eats gumbo and only ever thinks 'I'm-only-a-slave-but-at-least-I-got-paid,' as if all blacks in the 1930's had not one original thought in their heads (see 'Naola Beauty Academy' as well)." This upset me, especially as it came from a black woman, because I was looking for something poetically deeper that could connect me with **humanity**, and not just rehash the white-washed, stereotyped history of black America. Upon reading this collection again, though I still see these same issues, I do not think they are as prevalent as I made them seem. The third and fourth sections, while still playing at the ekphrastic style, are increasingly personal, and Tretheway's diction and imagery are more diverse than I wanted to originally accept.

I may have changed my opinions of her content, but I **still** feel that this collection is unbalanced because the uncanny, telling narration of her ekphrasis contrasts disharmoniously with her great sense of visual imagery. "Gesture of a Woman-in-Process" begins this trend: "In the foreground," we are told what this picture depicts, even as the last line gives us a poignant "still in motion" showing-detail; it feels as if Tretheway didn't know quite how to start the poem, so she wrote down some telling-facts and then evolved it into a showing-poem; while perhaps interesting on the level of authorial-poesis, I really have no desire to see the **process** of writing in a finalized poem... unless the poems means to do something of the sort. "Mythmaker" plays with this issue by not so much a use of "telling," but a reliance on the second person and a forced inclusion of the reader; while the poem itself feels right, "we" and "you" kick me out of the piece faster than the stereotypes. In "History Lesson," the reader gets "I am four in this photograph," which is quite possibly the least interesting hook to a poem I've ever read... and yet it's part of a poem that ends with dramatic impact. In all, I feel that while *Domestic Work* has the mind of a poet, it doesn't quite have the style of one.

Jill Kenna says

This took me a little while to get through but I really loved the poems in this collection.

theri says

I absolutely loved this book: the vignettes are superb.

You get so many vivid snapshots of life from the perspective of the women, from the perspective of the observer, and from outside perspectives.

She plays with form and makes a sonnet have life again. Its like form springs to life in her hands!

UrbanWildflower says

this woman uses language beautifully. i just read and reread her work. I see something new every time I do.

Faith says

"Selected by former poet laureate Rita Dove for the 1999 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, this debut is a marvelously assured collection exploring African-American heritage, civil rights, the work of women, and the sensuous work of the spirit. These exquisite poems are full of individuals who live, hurt, jazz, love, celebrate, sing, and, of course, work with dignity."--Herman Fong, The Odyssey Bookshop (South Hadley, MA

Michelle says

Natasha Trethewey's *Domestic Work* is a graphic relief map of history and memory. She writes in bumps and raises, valleys and rifts, impressions and depressions. Although this is her telling, her vision, I feel her voice is a bit removed; perhaps it's because she's addressing the past while she is very alive in the present, her present. And perhaps it is the style of the collection which makes me feel a bit detached. Where I quote below, I'm right there with her. Other places I'm not, I'm floating above the surface, looking down. I'm an outsider. I'll read *Native Guard* next.

From "Give and Take" -

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

From "Drapery Factory, Gulfport, MS, 1956"

But then she laughs
when she recalls the soiled Kotex
she saved, stuffed into a bag
in her purse, and Adam's look
on one white man's face, his hand
deep in knowledge.

and "Hot Combs"

At the junk shop, I find an old pair,
black with grease, the teeth still pungent
as burning hair. One is small,
fine toothed as if for a child. Holding it,
I think of my mother's slender wrist,
the curve of her neck as she leaned

over the stove, her eyes shut as she pulled
the wooden handle and laid flat the wisps
at her temples. the heat in our kitchen
made her glow that morning I watched her
wincing, the hot comb singeing her brow,
sweat glistening above her lips,
her face made strangely beautiful
as only suffering can do.

Kelly says

I've read some of these poems in anthologies, but hadn't read this whole collection. I just sat down and read it twice in a row and it is a book that I can imagine returning to again and again. I love the use of natural imagery and Tretheway's ability to invoke and insist upon the significance of the past.

Patricia says

Review pending.

Richard says

See comments for THRALL.

Helen says

I love Natasha Tretheway's poetry. You can feel her heart and soul bleed on to the page. She isn't a poet to be clever, she doesn't put words down just because no one has thought to put them down in such a way before. She puts them down because she cares about the words, and about the people and the stories the poems paint.

The poem by this poet, "Domestic Work, 1937", gives the book and the second section its name. It's final stanza,

She beats time on the rugs,
blows dust from the broom
like dandelion spores, each one
a wish for something better.

Not only neatly closes the chronicling of the weekend of a housecleaner, it breathes life in to the hopes and dreams of every person who works hard for a paycheck, the pride of place they take on the weekends when they turn their skills from need to want to. And so it goes throughout the book. Each one is deeply personal, but also universal in its appeal.

Codepoetz says

Each poem in this slim book is an image, carefully painted with words chosen by this Pulitzer Prize winning poet. The images are largely of poor lower class workers laboring. Despite this, the book carries an overall happy and hopeful tone. Poetry is one of those literary genres where you'll find a lot of pretenders; Natasha Trethewey is the real deal.

Libby says

Mark got this for me for Christmas last year, and I finally picked it up this fall. These poems didn't, in general, take my breath away quite like the ones in *Native Guard*, but they are still amazing and beautiful, and they do a nice job of using super-specific scenes to tell us something about life in general.

I'm very excited to hear she has a new volume coming out soon.
