

Marilyn Nelson

(26 April 1946 –)

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See also the Nelson Waniek entry in *DLB 120: American Poets Since World War II, Third Series* and the Nelson entry in *DLB 282: New Formalist Poets*.

BOOKS: *For the Body*, as Marilyn Nelson Waniek (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978);

The Cat Walked Through the Casserole and Other Poems for Children, by Nelson, as Waniek, and Pamela Espeland (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1984);

Mama's Promises, as Waniek (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985);

The Homeplace, as Waniek (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990);

Partial Truth, as Waniek (Willington, Conn.: Kutenai Press, 1992);

Magnificat, as Waniek (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994);

The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997);

Triolets for Triolet (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 2001);

Carver: A Life in Poems (Asheville, N.C.: Front Street, 2001);

She-Devil Circus (West Chester, Pa.: Aralia, 2001);

Down the Dark Pine Green: Leo Connellan and his Poetry (Hanover: University Press of New Hampshire/ Bristol: University Presses Marketing, 2003);

Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem, by Nelson and Espeland (Asheville, N.C.: Front Street, 2004);

A Wreath for Emmett Till (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005);

The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 2005);

Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color, by Nelson and Elizabeth Alexander,



Marilyn Nelson (photograph by Curt Richter; courtesy of the author)

illustrated by Floyd Cooper (Honesdale, Pa.: Wordsong, 2007);

Pemba's Song: A Ghost Story, by Nelson and Tonya Hegamin (New York: Scholastic, 2008);

The Freedom Business: Including a Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa (Honesdale, Pa.: Wordsong, 2008);

Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World (New York: Dial Books, 2009);

Beautiful Ballerina, with photographs by Susan Kuklin (New York: Scholastic, 2009);

Snook Alone, illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering (Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 2010);

Faster Than Light: New and Selected Poems, 1996–2011 (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 2012);

Ostrich and Lark (Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mill, 2012);

How I Discovered Poetry: The Story of a Renowned Poet's Childhood (New York: Dial Books, 2014);

My Seneca Village (South Hampton, N.H.: Namelos, 2015);

American Ace (New York: Dial Books, 2016);

The Meeting House (Simsbury, Conn.: Antrim House Press, 2016).

OTHER: "A Black Rainbow: Modern Afro-American Poetry," by Nelson, as Waniek, and Rita Dove, in *Poetry after Modernism*, edited by Robert McDowell (Brownsville, Ore.: Story Line Press, 1990), pp. 171–217;

"Marilyn Nelson," in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, volume 23, edited by Shelly Andrews (Detroit: Gale, 1996), pp. 247–267;

"Owning the Masters," in *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, edited by Annie Finch (Ashland, Ore.: Story Line, 1999), pp. 8–17;

Rumors of Troy: Poems Inspired by the Iliad, edited by Nelson (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2001).

TRANSLATIONS: Pil Dahlerup, *Literary Sex Roles* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Women in Higher Education, 1975);

Halfdan Rasmussen, *Hundreds of Hens and Other Poems for Children*, translated by Nelson, as Waniek, and Pamela Espeland (Minneapolis: Black Willow, 1982);

Euripides, *Hecuba*, in *Euripides, 1: Medea, Hecuba, Andromache, The Bacchae*, edited by David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie, Penn Greek Drama Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998);

Inge Pedersen, *The Thirteenth Month*, translated by Nelson (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 2005);

Rasmussen, *The Ladder*, translated by Nelson, illustrated by Pierre Pratt (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick, 2006).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS—
UNCOLLECTED: "The Space Where Sex Should Be: Toward a Definition of the Black American Literary Tradition," *Studies in Black Literature*, 6 (Fall 1975): 7–13;

"The Schizoid Implied Authors of Two Jewish-American Novels," *MELUS*, 7, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 21–39;

"The Power of Language in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*," by Nelson, as Waniek, *Minority Voices*, 4, no. 1 (1980): 23–28;

"Paltry Things: Immigrants and Marginal Men in Paule Marshall's Short Fiction," by Nelson, as Waniek, *Callaloo*, 6, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 46–56;

"A Multitude of Dreams," by Nelson, as Waniek, *Kenyon Review*, 13, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 214–226;

"The Fruit of Silence," *Teacher's College Record*, 108, no. 9 (September 2006): 1733–1741;

"National Poetry Month Day 4: 'Sawed-Through Link' by Marilyn Nelson," *Rumpus*, 4 April 2013 [Web, accessed 15 November 2016];

"Girl in the Attic," *Children's Literature*, 42 (2014): 99–107;

"Hilaria Batista de Almeida, Provider," *Poem-a-Day, Academy of American Poets*, 29 April 2015 [Web, accessed 15 November 2016];

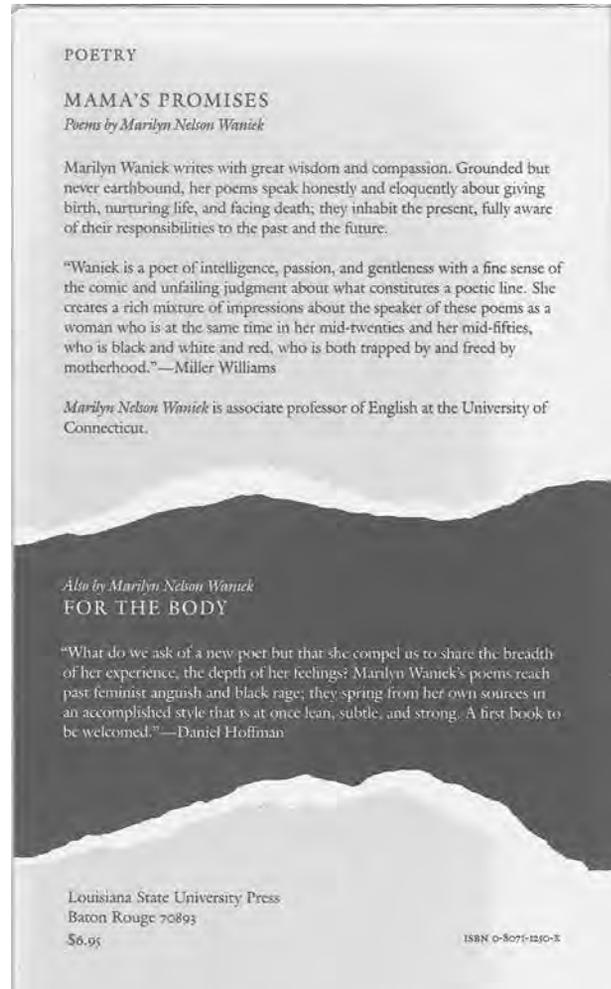
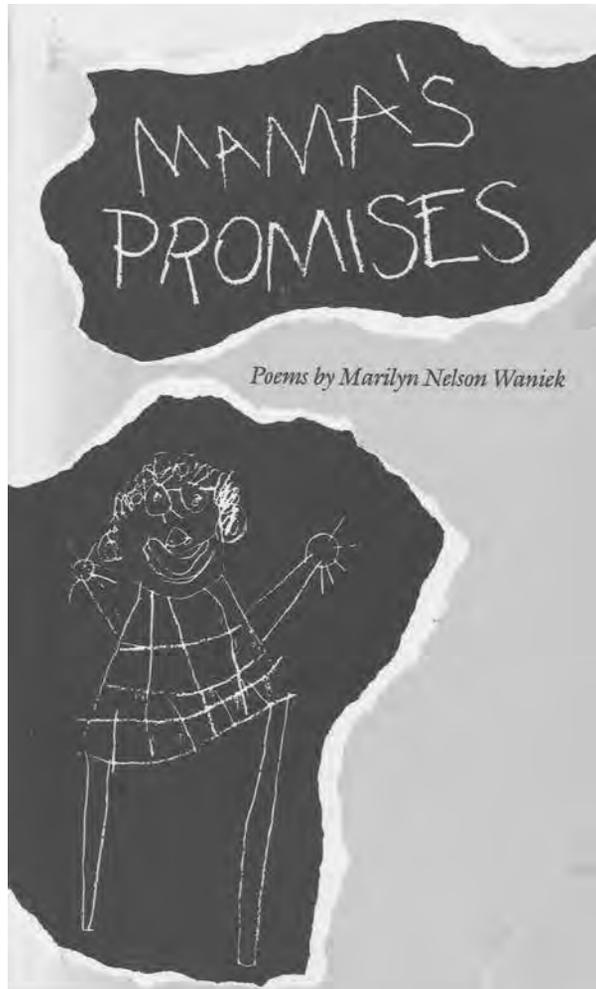
"Visiting Poet," *taosjournalofpoetry.com*, 27 September 2015 [Web, accessed 15 November 2016];

"Sor Juana Ines De La Cruz," and "Henriette Delle," *Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora*, 41, nos. 1–2 (Fall 2015): 252–254;

"Hildegard von Bingen," and "St. Catherine of Bologna," *Hudson Review*, 69, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 237–238.

Marilyn Nelson is one of the country's most prolific and celebrated poets as well as being a translator and children's book author. She has published more than twenty books of poetry for readers of all ages and has been a finalist for the National Book Award three times. The many honors she has received include the Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Connecticut Book Award for Lifetime Achievement in Service to the Literary Community. In 2013 she was appointed chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

An accomplished formalist, Nelson has expanded the lyric tradition through her research-based "lyric histories." In "Owning the Masters," Nelson asserts her right to take ownership of the "Angloamerican" lyric tradition, claiming it "belongs to all of us, or should." In response to Audre Lorde's famous dictum, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," Nelson asks, "But why should we dismantle the house? Why toss the baby over the porch railing, with its bassinetteful of soapy



Covers, front and back, for Nelson's book of poems published in 1985 (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

water?" Nelson believes that black poets must "take possession" of the tradition:

As we own the masters and learn to use more and more levels of this language we love, for whose continued evolution we share responsibility, the signifiers become ours.

Using a full range of poetic tools, Nelson crafts complex but accessible poetic sequences that chart and imagine extraordinary and ordinary African American lives, particularly lives that have been overlooked or underappreciated. In the process, she comments on and raises awareness of the history of institutionalized racism in the United States. She has also contributed to the development of a formalist tradition in African American poetry, following in the footsteps of poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden.

Marilyn Nelson was born on 26 April 1946 in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father, Melvin Nelson, was an officer in the United States Air Force, and her mother, Johnnie Mitchell Nelson, was a teacher. With her younger sister, Jennifer, and younger brother, Melvin Jr., she grew up primarily on Air Force bases around the country. In her interview with Diane Osen, Nelson recalls that even as a child she was particularly drawn to poetry:

I grew up with the sense that this was who I was, that I had to become a poet. I read my father's old college poetry textbooks, and I think that a lot of my early ethical training came from reading those poems. Many people go through a kind of spiritual search at about age twelve or thirteen, and poetry was my first answer, I guess. Then in high school, I wrote poetic prose pieces—sort of black stockinged, beret-wearing stuff about poor children with huge mournful

eyes. I didn't start writing poetry seriously until I was in college.

Her first published poem, which appeared in a high-school literary journal, celebrated the democratic right of each man to his opinion: "He can argue loud and long: / he has a right to his own wrong."

Nelson earned a B.A. from the University of California, Davis, in 1968, and two years later an M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania, where she met her first husband, Erdmann F. Waniek, a German graduate student. The couple married in 1970, and during the next several years she taught in varied schools and locations: Lane Community College and Reed College in Oregon, Nørre Nissum Seminarium in Denmark, and St. Olaf College in Minnesota. The year she spent teaching in Denmark influenced her in important ways, as she told Osen:

That's how I found out about Halfdan Rasmussen, who is a famous and popular children's poet in Denmark. I translated some of his poems as my first translation project. Then I went on to translate another, more serious Danish poet. But my interest in writing poetry for children began with the Rasmussen project, *Hundreds of Hens and Other Poems for Children*. My friend Pamela Espeland and I decided to try doing something like his work on our own, so just for fun we began collaborating on poems about things from childhood that we had found funny. Those poems became *The Cat Walked Through the Casserole and Other Poems for Children*.

In 1978 she settled at the University of Connecticut at Storrs and published her first book of poetry, *For the Body* (1978), under her married name: Marilyn Nelson Waniek. *For the Body* is mainly made up of personal free-verse poems, but even in her early work, she writes powerfully about racial prejudice. "I Am You Again" recalls the experience of one of her students, who as a child had integrated a white elementary school in Mississippi. In "I Imagine Driving Across Country," she writes of family unity—an imaginary cross-country trip with her sister and brother—but also touches on the ways even the most commonplace actions are affected by racism, for she remembers that when "our father in his uniform / drives 80," he is stopped by a cop who calls him "boy."

For her next several books, even after her first marriage ended in divorce and a second marriage, Nelson continued to publish under the name Waniek. In 1979 she earned her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota and married Roger Wilkenfeld,

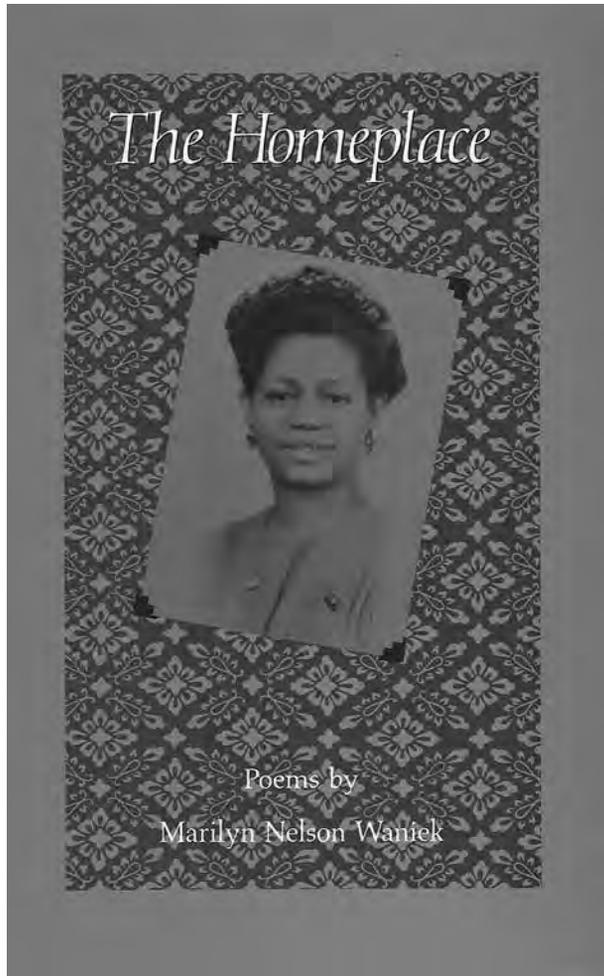
with whom she had two children, Jacob and Dora. Nelson and Wilkenfeld eventually divorced in 1998.

After the publication of *The Cat Walked Through the Casserole* in 1984, Nelson brought out her second collection of poems for adults, *Mama's Promises* (1985). These poems continue to tell personal stories, but also display a burgeoning feminist spirituality. About this collection Nelson has said: "I had originally intended 'Mama' . . . to be not only myself, my mother, and other mothers whose stories I snatched for the poems, but also the Divine Mother, the feminine face of God." This gesture is clear in "Wild Pansies," "Cover Photograph," and "My Second Birth," which ends,

Mama
was my first image of God.
I remember how she leaned over my crib,
her eyes full of sky.

The collection also includes autobiographical, narrative accounts of Nelson's experiences as a daughter and young mother. In her essay in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* she recounts that the poems in *Mama's Promises* were mostly written "by getting up before dawn and writing for the hour or two before Jacob (her infant son) woke." Her experience is evident in poems such as "Bali Hai Calls Mama" and "Dinosaur Spring," which elaborate the joys, terrors, and frustrations of early motherhood.

Nelson's next book, *The Homeplace* (1990), won the Anisfield-Wolf Award for race relations and was a finalist for the National Book Award. The poems in this collection tell stories about Nelson's immediate and extended family, "generations lost to be found / to be found," as she insists at the end of "The House on Moscow Street." The first group of poems explores the maternal side of her family history and also displays Nelson's growing control of traditional forms. She jokingly writes in her autobiographical essay that after the publication of *Mama's Promises* she "began to realize that maybe it was time to learn something about poetry," and she set out to study traditional prosody. In *The Homeplace*, her studies yield beautifully wrought sonnets, villanelles, and a variety of poems in rhyming quatrains and other forms. The sonnet "Chosen" describes the consensual but unequal sexual act between her great-great-grandmother Diverne, a slave brought to Hickman, Kentucky, from Jamaica, and her great-great-grandfather, Henry Tyler, a white man, which leads to the birth of Pomp, Nelson's great-grandfather. The poem concludes with this couplet:



Dust jacket and cover for Nelson's collections published in 1990 and 1994 (Brucoli Clark Layman Archive; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

And it wasn't rape.
In spite of her raw terror. And his whip.

The poem insists that the act was not rape because it led to the birth of a beloved child, but the concluding off-rhyme of "rape" with "whip" proclaims otherwise. Here, the sonnet form allows Nelson to communicate several things at once, and provide a structure for dealing with emotionally volatile material.

In "Wings," the book's second section, Nelson tells the story of her father's experiences as one of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first group of black soldiers trained as pilots and bombers during World War II. In "Tuskegee Airfield," Nelson moves between expressing pride about a father who was one of the first black men "to touch / their fingers to the sky," and outrage at the racism of the other Air Force officers "who believed / *you monkeys ain't meant to fly.*"

The Homeplace also demonstrates that Nelson has a gift for storytelling, "a novelist's sleight of hand and a poet's precision and music," as Marilyn Hacker suggested in her promotional comment on the book.

Matters of the spirit are an undertone in all of Nelson's early works, but with *Magnificat* (1994), her fourth book, theological and religious questions come to the forefront. Nelson explains the origins of this focus early in the collection with "Letter to a Benedictine Monk," which describes her brief romantic interest in a young man who eventually gives up worldly things to become a monk. Despite having a full life and family of her own, she admits she still thinks about him:

And once or twice a month for more than twenty
years
I've dreamed of a lost boy
and waked an unnamable ache.

Reigniting the friendship leads her to contemplate her own relationship to God and to write an ongoing series of poems about Father Jacques de Foyard Brown, or “Abba Jacob.” The third section of *Magnificat*, “A Desert Father,” charts the beginnings of this important renewed friendship and presents Abba Jacob’s quirky approach to the spiritual.

Inspired by the Magnificat, Mary’s passionate speech to her cousin Elizabeth immediately after the annunciation, Nelson writes intimately about her own journey toward God in the second section of the book, “Plain Songs.” She has described these poems as prayers that chart a movement “from selfish requests and gratitude for personal blessings to awe at the mysteries of time and death, and finally to compassion.” In “Dusting,” which comes toward the end of the section, Nelson writes:

Thank you for these tiny
particles of ocean salt,
pearl-necklace viruses,
winged protozoans[.]

The speaker is thankful for even the miniscule, invisible parts of God’s creation, and for the ordinary acts, like dusting, that ensure her part in things.

Her first book published under the name Marilyn Nelson, *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems* (1997), gathers poems from her first four collections, as well as the chapbook *Partial Truth* (1992). Instead of organizing the volume chronologically, Nelson organized the poems thematically. The first section, “Mama and Daddy,” draws poems from *For the Body*, but also *Mama’s Promises* and *The Homeplace*. Part two, “Homeplace,” includes poems from *The Homeplace* that are about her mother’s family, closing with “Thus Far by Faith,” an impressive crown of sonnets that charts the lives and experiences of Warren Thomas and his wife Sally, who founded Thomas Chapel, a C.M.E. church in Hickman, Kentucky, where Nelson’s grandmother grew up. In addition to highlighting her interest in spiritual quest and her facility with challenging forms, this sequence exemplifies Nelson’s ability to tell “complicated narratives via lyric strategies,” as April Lindner argues.

Spirituality is the organizing principle in the third section of the book, “Hermitage,” which includes poems from all four of her full-length books, as well as a few new poems, and the final section “Still Faith,” made up primarily of new work, meditates on the nature of good and evil. It includes what Nelson calls in her “Notes on the Poems” a group of “unbuttoned sonnets,” which she says “were responses to my readings about the nature of radi-

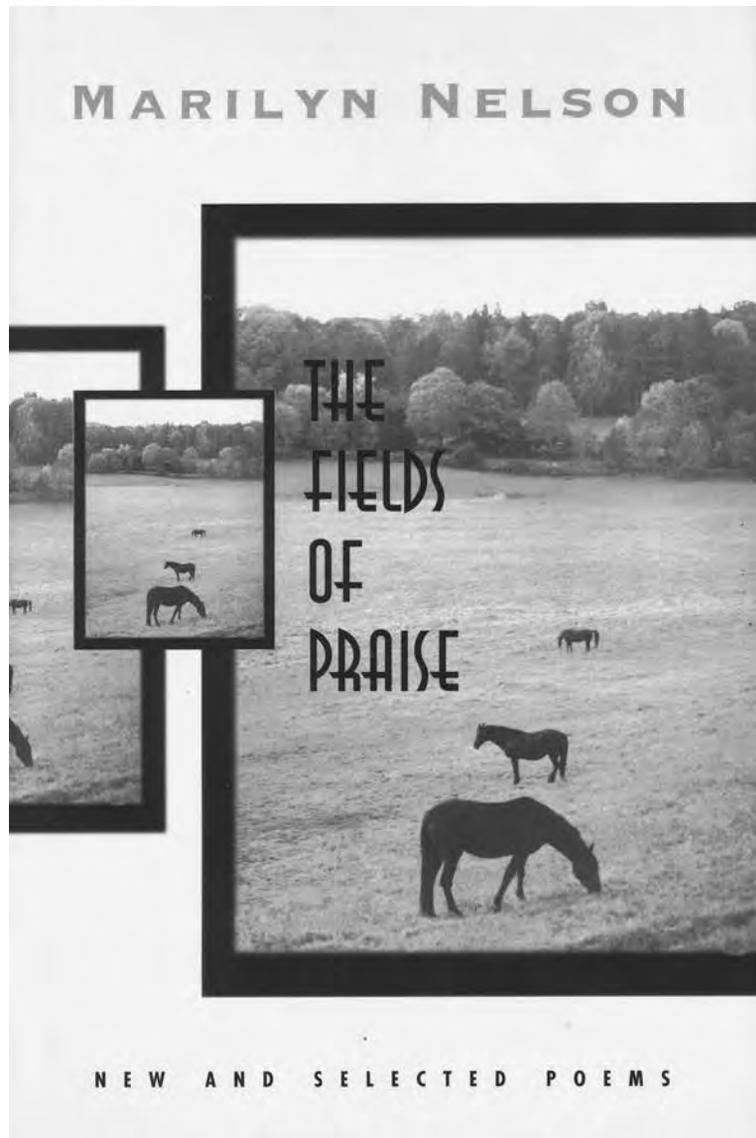
cal evil.” In these poems, Nelson voices her outrage about the ways those in power abuse it, whether they are parents, teachers, priests, or lawmakers. One poem, “No, No, Bad Daddy,” contemplates the evils of incest. In “Woman Kills and Eats Own Infant,” Nelson addresses the extreme violence represented every day in the media—video games, movies, newspapers—asking about her own culpability:

Aren’t I as aesthetically anesthetized? Not yet
a sworn enemy of innocence but as much a
participant
in evil I do not choose?

Organizing the collection this way allowed Nelson to underscore the common threads throughout her work, but as Hacker notes in *The Women’s Review of Books* (May 1998) the book also “traces a thematic and formal development, as the poet’s world-view opens out through her chosen subjects.”

With the publication of *The Fields of Praise*, Nelson’s career reached a new level. The book received notice from a range of venues, including *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *African American Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *The Hudson Review*, as well as *The Women’s Review of Books*. It won the prestigious Poets’ Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award, the PEN Winship Award, and the Lenore Marshall Prize. In 2000 Nelson received a Contemplative Practices Award from the American Council of Learned Societies and in 2001 was honored with a Guggenheim Fellowship. That same year, she published three new books: two chapbooks, *Triolets for Triolet* and *She-Devil Circus*; and *Carver: A Life in Poems*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award in the category of Young People’s Literature, and won the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award, the Flora Stieglitz Straus Award, and also received a Newbery Medal of Honor and a Coretta Scott King Award.

Carver: A Life in Poems focuses on the life and accomplishments of legendary scientist George Washington Carver, who was born a slave and raised until the age of ten by the childless white couple who had owned his mother. Through Carver’s story, Nelson celebrates the social and cultural advancements of African Americans during the early twentieth century, and also examines the complications of being a successful and famous black man during this time. Accompanied by archival photographs from Carver’s life, the poems engage a range of poetic forms (blank verse, rhymed and unrhymed sonnets, free verse), and are written from a multitude of perspectives. Many poems describe Carver’s inner thoughts,



Dust jacket for Nelson's 1997 book that includes selections from four books as well as a chapbook (Collection of John Cusatis)

creating a complex portrait of a man who is creative, deeply religious, and resilient in the face of abject bigotry. In “The Dimensions of the Milky Way,” Nelson juxtaposes Carver’s scientific understanding of the universe—imagining the earth as a speck of dust when viewed from the center of the galaxy—with his appreciation for this world. Her musical language captures Carver’s sense of awe at the beauty of nature:

He looks around:
that shagbark, those swallows,
the fireflies, that blasted mosquito;
this beautiful world.

The range of other perspectives presented include those of John Bentley, the man hired to rescue Carver and his mother from kidnappers, various neighbors, several of his teachers, and his colleagues at Tuskegee Institute who resent him, complaining that he is “so high and mighty, / he must think he’s white.” She also exposes the contradictions Carver was forced to live as a famous black scientist and inventor in a white, segregationist world. In “Goliath,” she unflinchingly describes “another lynching”—“A black man’s hacked-off penis in his mouth / his broken body torched”—and spends most of the poem elaborating Carver’s response to the frightened stu-

dents in his Bible class. “Don’t yield to fear,” he tells them, urging them not to respond to hate with more hate, which can only create more destruction.

Though the book was marketed to young adults, the poems in *Carver*, and her subsequent “lyric histories,” are as powerful and complex as any in her oeuvre. In a 2011 interview with Jeanne Murray Walker, Nelson explained that while she has written some works specifically for children—such as her translations of Danish writer Rasmussen—the poems in books such as *Carver* are “ordinary” poems: “they’re not written for children; they are just poems. I write what I write.” *Carver* was reviewed in respected literary journals, including *Southern Review*, *The Hudson Review*, and *African American Review*, suggesting that the book could be appreciated by adult as well as younger readers.

In 2002 Nelson became Professor Emerita at the University of Connecticut and then spent two years as visiting professor at the University of Delaware. In 2004 she founded Soul Mountain Retreat, opening her home to young poets who needed space and time to devote to their writing. Nelson’s next book, *Fortune’s Bones: The Manumission Requiem* (2004), was also marketed for young readers and continues Nelson’s project of writing poetry in order to call attention to African American history. Commissioned by the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, as the culmination of their investigation into the history of a skeleton that belonged to their collection, the book tells the story of a slave named Fortune, who served Dr. Preserved Porter, an eighteenth-century bonesetter. When Fortune died, Dr. Porter used his skeleton for anatomical study.

As with *Carver*, Nelson presents Fortune’s life and death from various perspectives, including that of the doctor, who dissects Fortune’s body and views it as “a new continent,” constructing a false mutuality between them: “In profound and awful intimacy / I enter Fortune, and he enters me.” “Dinah’s Lament” has a blues cadence that presents the perspective of Fortune’s wife, also a slave, who is compelled to clean the room in which her husband’s skeleton hangs. Dr. Porter’s awe and appreciation of the forced contributions of his former slave to science ring false when juxtaposed with Dinah’s horror and sorrow:

To dust the hands what use to stroke my breast;
to dust the arms what hold me when I cried.

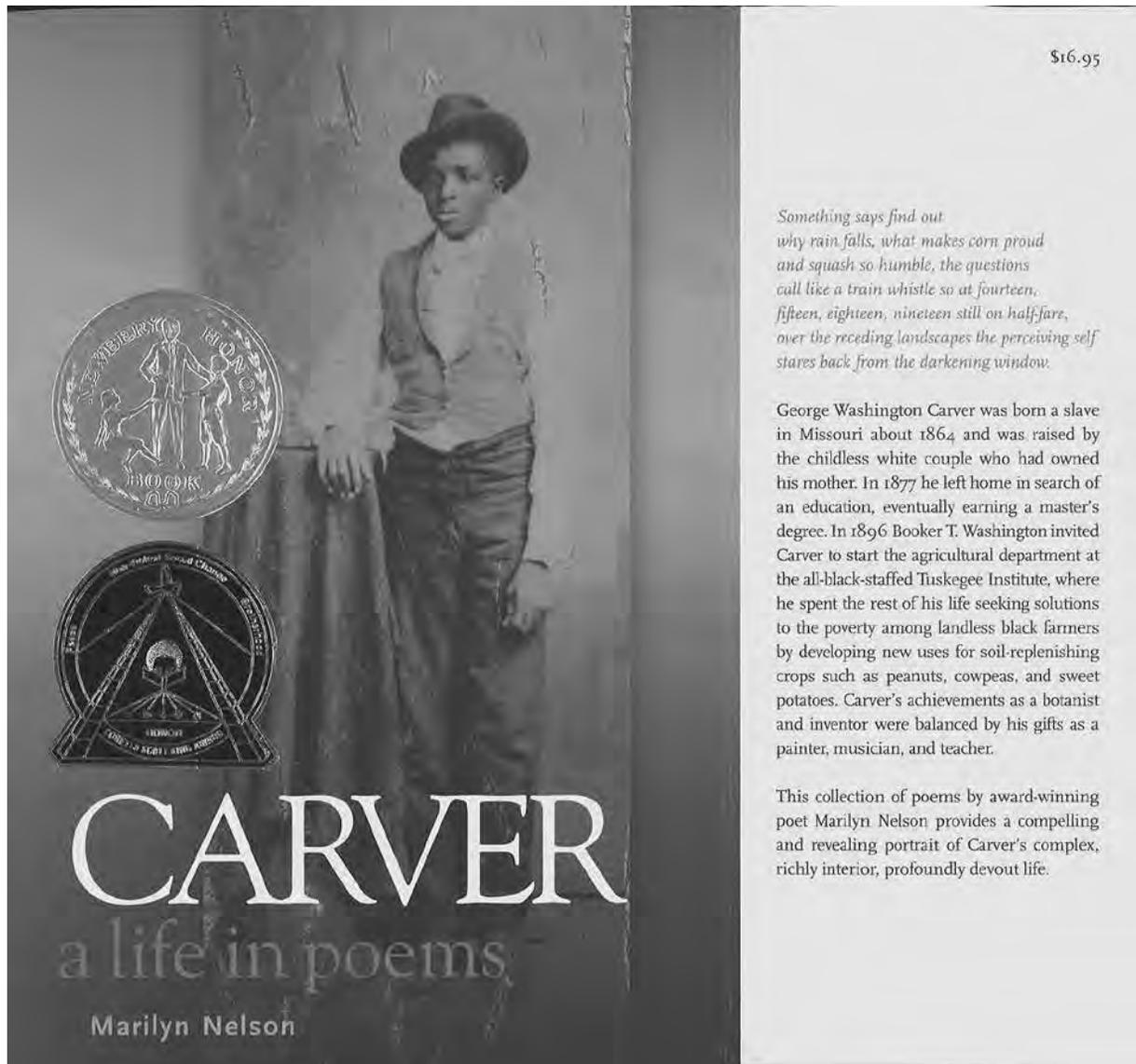
Nelson once again addresses the legacy of slavery, but the author’s note makes clear that the poem was intended to be a requiem for all of the people who died on 11 September 2001: not only those who

died in the terrorist attacks, but also “the victims of starvation, of illness, of poverty, of war, of old age, of neglect: Everyone,” suggesting that this specific story speaks to all the deaths that plague the world.

Nelson’s next book, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005) with illustrations by Philippe Lardy, is another work of lyric history and also was marketed for young adults. The Petrarchan sonnets in this poetic sequence describe and create the memorial wreath Nelson would like to weave for Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who in 1955 was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman while he was visiting family in a small Mississippi town. The two men who murdered Till were acquitted by an all-white jury, igniting outrage that helped spur the Civil Rights Movement. Structured as a heroic crown of sonnets, the sequence contemplates Emmett Till’s death in poems that are layered with allusions to the traditions of the sonnet sequence, the language of flowers, the history of lynching, as well as sound and visual imagery. Nelson’s ability to meet the demands of the heroic crown of sonnets is impressive—the last line of one sonnet is the first line of the next, and the final sonnet, made up of the first lines of the previous fourteen, is an acrostic, the first letters of whose words spell out vertically “R.I.P. Emmett L. Till.”

As with *Fortune’s Bones*, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* has both a narrow and a broad focus. One sonnet focuses in on the suffering of Till’s mother, “Surely you must have thought of suicide, / seeing his gray flesh, chains around his throat,” while another links the specific tragedy of Till’s lynching to other injustices of history such as the Nazi gas chambers in the Holocaust, “Piles of shoes,” and the World Trade Center bombing, “The broken towers.” *A Wreath for Emmett Till* won the 2005 Boston Globe/Horn Book Award and was a 2006 Coretta Scott King Honor Book, a 2006 Michael L. Printz Honor Book, and a 2006 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award Honor Book. *Kirkus Reviews* (1 March 2005) gave the book a starred review, calling it “a towering achievement, one whose power and anger and love will make breath catch in the throat and bring tears to the eyes.”

In 2005 Nelson also published *The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems* (2005), which is mostly made up of the long title poem, which allows her to engage and perhaps indulge all of her verse-based pleasures: wry humor, complex narrative, strict form, and an exploration of the nature of spiritual quest. Loosely modeled after Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1478), the sequence tells the story of a “pilgrimage” Nelson thought she could afford for her extended family, as she writes in the “General Prologue”:



*Dust jacket and front flap for Nelson's 2001 book of poems focused on the life of George Washington Carver
(Lexington County Public Library)*

Thinking of a reverse diaspora
I'd planned a pilgrimage to Africa.
Zimbabwe, maybe, maybe Senegal:
some place sanctified by the Negro soul.

She finds, however, that the grant money she had
planned to use for the trip would not go that far.
Instead, they decide to travel to Bahia, Brazil, where
Nelson's son is studying,

and go to *A Igreja do Bonfim*,
a church on a hill overlooking All Saint's Bay
sacred to Christians and followers of Candomblé.

\$16.95

*Something says find out
why rain falls, what makes corn proud
and squash so humble, the questions
call like a train whistle so at fourteen,
fifteen, eighteen, nineteen still on half-fare,
over the receding landscapes the perceiving self
stares back from the darkening window.*

George Washington Carver was born a slave in Missouri about 1864 and was raised by the childless white couple who had owned his mother. In 1877 he left home in search of an education, eventually earning a master's degree. In 1896 Booker T. Washington invited Carver to start the agricultural department at the all-black-staffed Tuskegee Institute, where he spent the rest of his life seeking solutions to the poverty among landless black farmers by developing new uses for soil-replenishing crops such as peanuts, cowpeas, and sweet potatoes. Carver's achievements as a botanist and inventor were balanced by his gifts as a painter, musician, and teacher.

This collection of poems by award-winning poet Marilyn Nelson provides a compelling and revealing portrait of Carver's complex, richly interior, profoundly devout life.

D. H. Tracy gave the collection a mixed review in *Poetry* (May 2006): "Because the couplets' fidelity is to clarity rather than grace, the narratives rumble along, as though on eight-sided wheels. The pilgrims prove to have appealing camaraderie, distinct voices, and lively stories, and the pilgrims' characterization is Nelson's strongest achievement in the book." After the prologue, each subsequent poem tells a story by and about the people she and her group encounter during their travels. Instead of the Knight and the Miller, the reader meets "The Pilot," "The Activist," and "The Jazz Musician." Several of the tales

are told from Nelson's point of view. Readers learn about Nelson's suitcase never arriving in Brazil, two black "sisters" who travel the globe in "Harmonia and Moreen," and Nelson and her family's uncomfortable sense of privilege as they travel the "narrow winding streets" of Bahia. Critic Todd Edmondson examines how Nelson's poems "enter into dialogue with historical pilgrimage, and finally challenge the tradition to present something new." *The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems* won the L. E. Phillabaum Poetry Award and was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award.

In the next half decade Nelson published several books for children and young-adult readers as well as a new volume of selected poems. She wrote the texts for two more children's books: *Beautiful Ballerina* (2009) celebrates that rarity, the black ballerina, and is illustrated with photographs by Susan Kuklin of the Dance Theater of Harlem; and *Snook Alone* (2010), which was illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering, tells the story of Abba Jacob's little rat terrier "Snook." Collaborating with the writer Tonya Hegamin, she also published a young-adult novel, *Pemba's Song: A Ghost Story* (2008), which mixes Hegamin's hip-hop poetry and prose to tell the story of an African American teenager. When her father dies, Pemba and her mother move from Brooklyn to Colchester, Connecticut, and into a house built during the colonial era. The house turns out to be haunted by the ghost of an eighteenth-century slave named Phyliss, whose story Nelson tells in a sequence of sonnets.

Nelson also continued to publish books that explore and revive African American lives and legacies. Written with the poet Elizabeth Alexander and illustrated by Floyd Cooper, *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color* (2007) tells the story of Prudence Crandall of Canterbury, Connecticut. In 1831, with the town's encouragement and support, Crandall, a Quaker, opened a boarding school for young women. During the second year of its existence, she began accepting young black women as students and was faced with the racist response of the town, which ultimately brought a court case against her "for the 'crime' of teaching young black women," according to the book's introduction. In twenty-four formal and informal sonnets, Nelson and Alexander expose the true criminals: the system of chattel slavery; the racism that infected the entire country, North and South; and the hypocritical townspeople who go so far as to poison the school's drinking water and set fire to the schoolhouse. The irony that educating young black women is considered criminal is powerfully conveyed in "The Tao of the Trial," as one witness testifies:

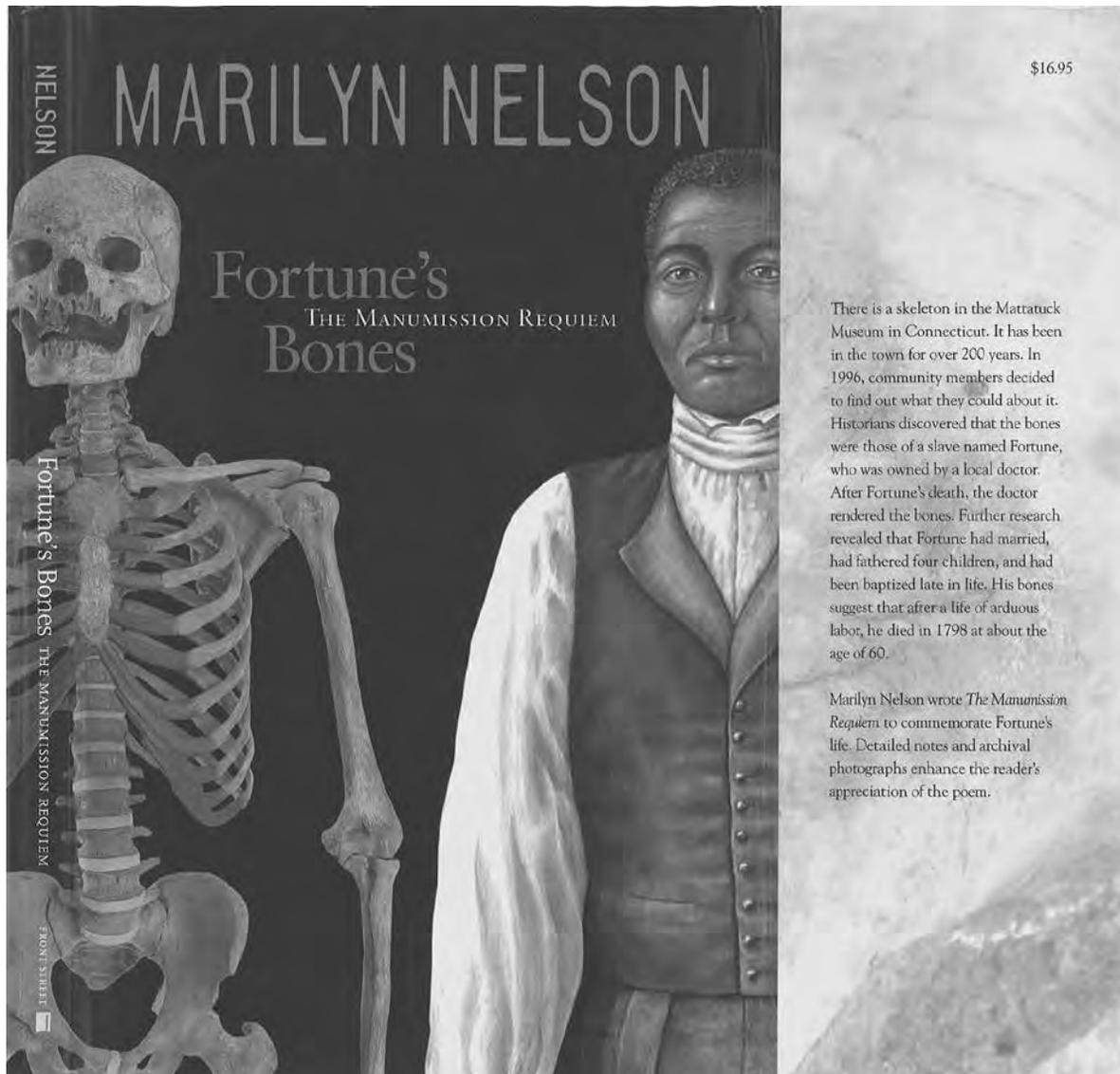
Your Honor, I submit as evidence
of the alleged teaching of alleged students
this colored girl here, who openly reads books
and gazes skyward, who has been overheard
conversing animatedly in polysyllabic words.

Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color received a starred review from *Kirkus Reviews*, and was also reviewed by *Library Journal*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Book*, and *Horn Book Magazine*.

The Freedom Business: Including a Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa (2008) is based on the slave narrative of Venture Smith, which was originally published in 1798. The book interweaves Smith's original text with Nelson's poems, which focus on key moments in his life. Smith was captured and brought to Rhode Island from Guinea at the age of six. The first poem in the book, "Witness," is a sonnet that highlights his royal origins—"I was the first wife's firstborn of the Prince / of Dikandarra"—and the tragedy of his capture, while "A Voyage by Sea" succinctly details the terrors of the Middle Passage. In addition to keeping the dehumanizing horrors of the slave trade from fading into the background, Nelson details Smith's remarkable accomplishments—through his ingenuity, stoicism, and perseverance he is able to purchase his own freedom, his family's, and a productive farm that he manages with the help of other slaves whose freedom he has purchased. But she also emphasizes the ways Smith's identity and beliefs are shaped by the corrupt and corrupting aspects of this exchange-based system of value.

As Nelson writes in her introduction, Smith was "very much a man of his times: an eighteenth-century rationalist for whom everything—including himself and his wife and children—had a price." In "The Freedom Business," economic terminology predominates, as the poem begins: "Freeing people is good business, in principle." Expecting "sixty percent / of their earnings" while he is repaid, Smith often encounters financial loss and heartbreak, as one man runs off before repaying him and another chooses to return to his master. He even gives a financial accounting of his children, his son "Solomon (seventy-five pounds)," who soon dies from scurvy, and

My daughter (forty-four pounds)
marrying a fool and contracting a fatal disease.
I paid for a physician (forty pounds)
but Hannah died.



Dust jacket and front flap for Nelson's 2004 book inspired by a skeleton at the Mattatuck Museum in Connecticut (Lexington County Public Library)

Smith grasps that this system of value is bankrupt and soul-killing, but he cannot help himself.

In 2009 Nelson published *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World*, another lyric history that focuses on the musicians in the first integrated all-woman big band. Originally created to raise money for the school the black members of the band attended in Mississippi, the Sweethearts of Rhythm ended up turning professional in 1941. They were extremely popular, touring the country, and playing in venues such as the Howard Theatre, the Apollo Theatre, and the Savoy Ballroom, breaking racial and gender barriers at a time when

the jazz world was both segregationist and sexist. Nelson takes an ingenious approach to her subject: the poems are spoken by the musicians' instruments. In "That Man of Mine," "Tiny" Davis's trumpet tells of "traversing the United States / performing one-nighters, traveling thousands of miles in a year." The formal rhyme schemes—rhyming quatrains and sonnets—give the poems a musical structure that is further enhanced by Nelson's creative use of meter and sound. "Bugle Call Rag," which is told by Nova Lee McGee's trumpet, is awash with alliteration and syncopated beats that recall the sounds of the jazz trumpet:

No trumpet has ever been tempted
not to funambulate
on the filament of a melody.

Joyce Adams Burner in *School Library Journal* (October 2009) wrote that Nelson's "poetry evokes the rich wail of swing music with varied meters, rhyme schemes, and free verse, calling up memories of the Dust Bowl, World War II, rationing, segregation, and music that momentarily lifted its listeners above hardship."

Faster Than Light: New and Selected Poems, 1996–2011 (2012) includes in its first section, "I. Lyric Histories," many of the poems from Nelson's books that explore history. "II. Other Selected Poems" features selections from *The Cachoeira Tales*. The final part, "III. New and Uncollected Poems," includes an homage to Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room," and an impressive seven-part "modified rondeau redoublé," "Millie-Christine," which explores the lives of Mille and Christine McCoy. Conjoined twins who were born into slavery, Millie and Christine died as free women. Spoken by Millie, as she and her twin are dying, the poem contemplates the experience and meaning of their shared existence. In section six of the poem every full sentence, except for one, begins with the pronoun "My"—"My birth. My mother. My right hands. My chests"—expressing and enacting the difficulty of knowing what individual, singular possession can mean for Millie-Christine. The rondeau redoublé form creates repetitions that gesture toward this experience of simultaneous doubling and singularity. *Faster Than Light* won the Milt Kessler Poetry Book Award.

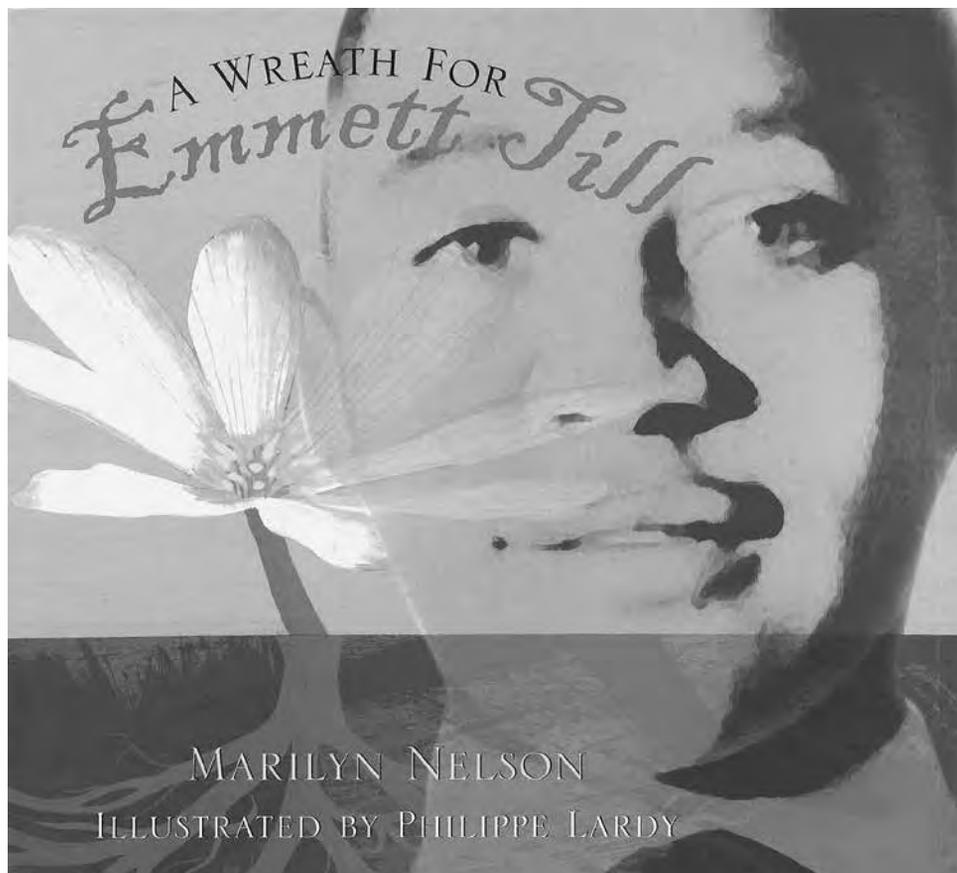
Nelson's memoir-in-verse, *How I Discovered Poetry: The Story of a Renowned Poet's Childhood* (2014), recounts her experience of growing up on Air Force bases across the United States. It is illustrated by Hadley Hooper, and includes photographs from Nelson's childhood. Composed of a series of accessible sonnets that detail the ups and downs of moving from base to base because of her father's career in the Air Force, the poems also detail Nelson's early experiences of racism and her observations of the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. In a review for *Voice of Youth Advocates* (December 2013), Jennifer Rummel suggests that *How I Discovered Poetry* "would be an excellent book for classroom use as an introduction to the Civil Rights Movement."

In *My Seneca Village* (2015), another lyric history marketed to young adults, Nelson both imagines and brings attention to the African American village in Manhattan that formed in 1825 and was razed in 1857 to make way for Central Park. She combed through

historical accounts of Seneca Village and drew on documentary information to create vivid portraits of the people and the places, including streets, houses, churches, and businesses, which were obliterated from the landscape and from collective memory. The poems give voice to various imagined citizens of Seneca Village, including a music teacher, a hairdresser, a bootblack, a pastor, an abolitionist, and an Underground Railroad conductor. Each one is accompanied by a prose description that sets the scene for the poems, providing the reader with information and commentary on the issues of the period, including New York state laws regarding the abolition of slavery, anti-abolition riots, Nat Turner's revolt, the cholera epidemic that killed four thousand people, and the suffragette movement. *My Seneca Village* was widely reviewed in venues that focus on young people's literature, including *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *Horn Book Magazine*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Library Journal*. Gail Bush, writing for *Booklist* (1 September 2015), calls *My Seneca Village* "an American saga so well suited to Nelson's poetic touch, it is a gift meant to be gently unwrapped."

In 2016 Nelson brought out two books, the first being *American Ace*, a novel in verse about Connor, a young Italian American searching for his identity, after his father learns that he was adopted by the man he believed was his birth father. Connor learns that his biological paternal grandfather may have been an African American pilot in Italy during World War II. The unfolding mystery awakens Connor's curiosity and leads him to research the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. Nelson's second book published that year, *The Meeting House*, focuses on the first two hundred years in the three-hundred-and-fifty-year history of the First Congregational Church in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Beginning with the construction of the "meeting house" in 1666, when America was still a colony, Nelson recounts chapters in the church's history—George Washington leading troops through the town in 1776, the meeting house burning to the ground in 1815—and also uses the church to frame broader moments in American history, including the temperance and suffrage movements, and the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. At the same time, as in works like *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color* and *My Seneca Village*, many of the poems bear witness to the darker sides of both histories in poems that mourn the massacre and disenfranchisement of indigenous tribal peoples and the legacy of the slave trade and intense racism that existed in the North as well as the South.

The first poem, "The Meeting House," describes the construction of the physical building, the sound



Dust jackets for Nelson's books published in 2005 and 2009 (Lexington County Public Library)

of “axes and saws, / iron hammers pounding iron nails,” and ends with a concise portrait of the first congregation:

They sit divided by the center aisle:
the left side men, the right women and girls,
boys in the back with the servants and slaves.

The poems that follow detail the histories of various church pastors, and tell colorful tales of the church’s members. Some poems emphasize the congregation’s decidedly unchristian, hypocritical deeds: “In a Moral Wilderness” tells the story of “Rev. D.D.,” a pedophile; “Me Jane,” notes the sale of “one molato girl / of three years old called Jane” to two rich members of the church, “who have seats in the front pews.” The poem “Christians” exposes a dark moment in the church’s history, when the Church Council fired their minister, “Reverend Colton,” who sympathized with the Amistad prisoners and questioned the practices of the slave trade. By focusing on this story, Nelson spells out a central question of this collection that is still relevant today—namely, how people of faith can be complicit in crimes against others.

Now nearing the beginning of her fifth decade as a writer, Marilyn Nelson is an important figure in contemporary American poetry, particularly for her lyric sequences that artfully contribute to the understanding of American culture and history. In her review of *Faster Than Light* for *The Women’s Review of Books* (November/December 2013), Alicia Ostriker writes, “Some of the qualities I enjoy in Nelson, in addition to her craftsmanship, are her richly sensuous amplitude, her humor, and her pure, ornery allegiance to old-fashioned values: truth, courage, loyalty, humility, service to others, faith. It is good to know that she has been properly valued in the poetry world.” Many of Nelson’s readers clearly feel the same way; one can only hope that as her reputation grows, more readers—young and old—will find their way to her enriching body of work.

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April Lindner, “Eloquent Silences: Lyric Solutions to the Problem of Biographical Narrative,” in *The Contemporary Narrative Poem: Critical Crosscurrents*, edited by Steven P. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 102–122;

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Myisha Priest, “‘The Nightmare Is Not Cured’: Emmett Till and American Healing,” *American Quarterly*, 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 1–24;

Kelly Wissman, “‘Let Me Gather Spring Flowers for a Wreath’: Writing about Historical Trauma for Young People in *A Wreath for Emmett Till*,” *Journal of Children’s Literature*, 40, no. 1 (2014): 5–13;

William K. Woolfitt, “‘Oh, Catfish and Turnip Greens’: Black Oral Traditions in the Poetry of Marilyn Nelson,” *African American Review*, 47 (Summer–Fall 2014): 231–246.

Papers:

Manuscripts and other archives related to Marilyn Nelson’s career are included in the Kerlan Collection, University of Minnesota.

Interview with Marilyn Nelson

This interview was conducted on 23 October 2013 via video conference call between John Cusatis's AP English Literature class at the School of the Arts (SOA) in Charleston, South Carolina, and Marilyn Nelson, who spoke from her home in East Haddam, Connecticut. Interviewers were Cusatis and the following students: Eduardo Abreu, Chris Andrews, Jalesia Claxton, Ethan Courville, Hannah Demos, Jordan DiGregorio, David Doboszanski, Cooper Donoho, Emily Fairchild, Elizabeth Rose Grech, Delaney Hogan, Anna Holloway, Ellison Karesh, Ellen Kitchens, Halle Murphy, Bianca Palillo, Bena Parker, Jess Rames, Bethany Schroeder, Ashley Smalls, Laila Teseniar, Tyler Vandygrift, and Jemma Wyke-Smith.

SOA: Hello, Professor Nelson.

Marilyn Nelson: Hello.

SOA: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. Is it possible for you to read something for us before we start our discussion?

Nelson: Sure.

SOA: We would like to hear you read "Mama's Promise," if you don't mind?

Nelson: Sure, let me just find it. Okay. "Mama's Promise."

I have no answer to the blank inequity
of a four-year-old dying of cancer.
I saw her on TV and wept
with my mouth full of meatloaf.

I constantly flash on disasters now;
red lights shout *Warning. Danger.*
everywhere I look.
I buckle him in, but what if a car
with a grille like a sharkbite
roared up out of the road?
I feed him square meals,
but what if the fist of his heart
should simply fall open?
I carried him safely

as long as I could,
but now he's a runaway
on the dangerous highway.
Warning. Danger.
I've started to pray.

But the dangerous highway
curves through blue evenings
when I hold his yielding hand
and snip his minuscule nails
with my vicious-looking scissors.
I carry him around
like an egg in a spoon,
and I remember a porcelain fawn,
a best friend's trust,
my broken faith in myself.
It's not my grace that keeps me erect
as the sidewalk clatters downhill
under my rollerskate wheels.

Sometimes I lie awake
troubled by this thought:
It's not so simple to give a child birth;
you also have to give it death,
the jealous fairy's christening gift.

I've always pictured my own death
as a closed door,
a black room,
a breathless leap from the mountaintop
with time to throw out my arms, lift my head,
and see, in the instant my heart stops,
a whole galaxy of blue.
I imagined I'd forget,
in the cessation of feeling,
while the guilt of my lifetime floated away
like a nylon nightgown,
and that I'd fall into clean, fresh forgiveness.

Ah, but the death I've given away
is more mine than the one I've kept:
from my hands the poisoned apple,
from my bow the mistletoe dart.

Then I think of Mama,
her bountiful breasts.
When I was a child, I really swear,
Mama's kisses could heal.

I remember her promise,
and whisper it over my sweet son's sleep:

*When you float to the bottom, child,
like a mote down a sunbeam,
you'll see me from a trillion miles away:
my eyes looking up to you,
my arms outstretched for you like night.*

[Applause]

Nelson: Thank you.

SOA: Thank you so much. It's such a powerful poem. Could you comment a little bit on how you went about crafting it?

Nelson: Sure. It's about my son. I talked to him on the phone about an hour ago. He's thirty-three years old now. I was a new mother, so it's obviously about that. I happened to see a little girl on a morning talk show, a little girl who was dying of cancer. It was very moving because she knew she was dying. She was a four-year-old, but she had the wisdom of knowing she was mortal. It was very touching. And the rest of it is just thinking about the responsibility of having a child. You have a child, and one of the first things you realize is that you should have made the world a better place first. The world is so flawed. So it's also about that. The image of leaping from the mountain-top is actually, in my mind, related to a poem by the American poet James Dickey called "Falling," which is about a stewardess falling out of an airplane. The last little bit about the poison apple is from "Snow White," and the mistletoe dart is from Baldur and Loki, the Norse gods. Baldur, the son of Odin, the greatest god, was beloved, beautiful, generous, and joyful. He began to have ominous dreams of his own death. His father went to everything in the cosmos and had everything vow not to harm Baldur. Only the small, innocuous mistletoe plant was overlooked and did not make a vow. Loki, the bad-guy god, made an arrow out of mistletoe and asked the blind god, Hod, to throw it. It killed Baldur.

SOA: Do you still feel any of these emotions, now that your son is thirty-three? When did you stop feeling like you were carrying an egg around in a spoon?

Nelson: Well, you can't carry them around after a while. [Laughs] That egg grows legs. But, yes, I still feel responsible for him.

SOA: To what extent do you feel your own early years and, later, your poetry were shaped by having to move from place to place due to your father's military service?

Nelson: I have a book coming out in January called *How I Discovered Poetry*, which is about my life in the 1950s. In 1950 I was four years old, and in 1960 I was fourteen, so it's about those ten years of my life. At one point, when she's about four or five, the child, me, says, "When you die, you go to a different school." There's a lot of stuff like that, about thinking that when you get transferred, the whole world that you leave behind disappears, doesn't exist anymore. I remember the first time I met somebody who had been in one of my earlier classes. He had been in my fourth grade class, and here he was in eighth grade walking down the street in base housing area, and I burst into tears. I'm sure it was really annoying for him because I kind of clung to him in school, like he was related to me or something. I'm sure he wanted me to leave him alone. So there's that, and there's the difficulty of learning people's names. It's a lifelong thing. Then there's the feeling that if you've been some place for a couple of years, you're kind of like, "Ah, I've been here. I've seen all this. I'm ready to go on." So, all of those things are in my poems. I think that people who didn't grow up that way might not see those things, but I know they're there. There are the more positive aspects: being able to meet people easily, being open, learning the pleasures of travel, enjoying looking at maps.

SOA: You mention "the pleasures of travel." You've traveled a great deal around the world in your adult life. How important has this travel been to your development as a writer? Are there places you've visited that have had a particular impact?

Nelson: I love travel. I've written about some of the places I've traveled. Several, I suppose, have had an impact on my development as a writer. I made a trip to Mexico on a retreat, learning about third-world poverty. That was a very eye-opening experience. About three years ago, I went to the Middle East, to Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. That changed the way I see the world. I have a little children's picture book about animals in the Kalahari Desert that I wrote after making a couple of road trips in the Kalahari and deciding to try to do something to help the so-called "bushmen," the Khoisan people. They are probably, as the Earth's peoples go, toward the bottom of the totem pole of economic

development. They have nothing. My book is illustrated by Khoisan artists.

SOA: You collaborated with Pamela Espeland on such books as *The Cat Walked Through the Casserole and Other Poems for Children*. In what ways is collaborating with other artists a confining or a liberating experience?

Nelson: It's really fun. Pamela is my best girlfriend. We started writing that book, *The Cat Walked Through the Casserole*, just for fun. It wasn't even thought of as a book. We were just writing funny rhymes together. She is also a professional editor. We've worked together on all of my books. She is an excellent editor. And then I've done collaboration with Elizabeth Alexander, which was completely different. Pamela and I would sit together, and I would make up a line, and then she would make up a line, and then I would make up a line. It was just like playing ping-pong or something. Elizabeth Alexander and I did research together and then spent a weekend closeted in our rooms writing. Then we came out and showed each other the poems we had written. But it *is* very—I think you used the word *liberating*?

SOA: Yes ma'am.

Nelson: Yes, because you don't have the complete responsibility for the work. You are sharing it, and you're playing off of someone else's ideas. It's liberating and fun.

SOA: Your poems can be deeply spiritual, and religious ideas inform many of them. To what degree do you see poetry as an extension of your personal religious belief?

Nelson: [Pauses] Yikes! [Laughter] Well, it's a part of who I am, and I write who I am. I started writing the book *Mama's Promises* because I was interested in writing about the experience of being a mother, but I also was interested in exploring the idea of God as a mother. [Pauses] I'm sorry. I'm kind of flabbergasted. I suppose my poems *are* very much related to my spiritual life because I'm a free speaker, a free thinker in the world of spirituality. So I feel like I have to work things out for myself. I hope my poems are not dogmatic. But they are wrestling with spiritual and Christian issues.

SOA: Many of your poems deal with family history, and you pay homage to your mother and father

in several. In what ways has being aware of those who came before you affected your life and your work?

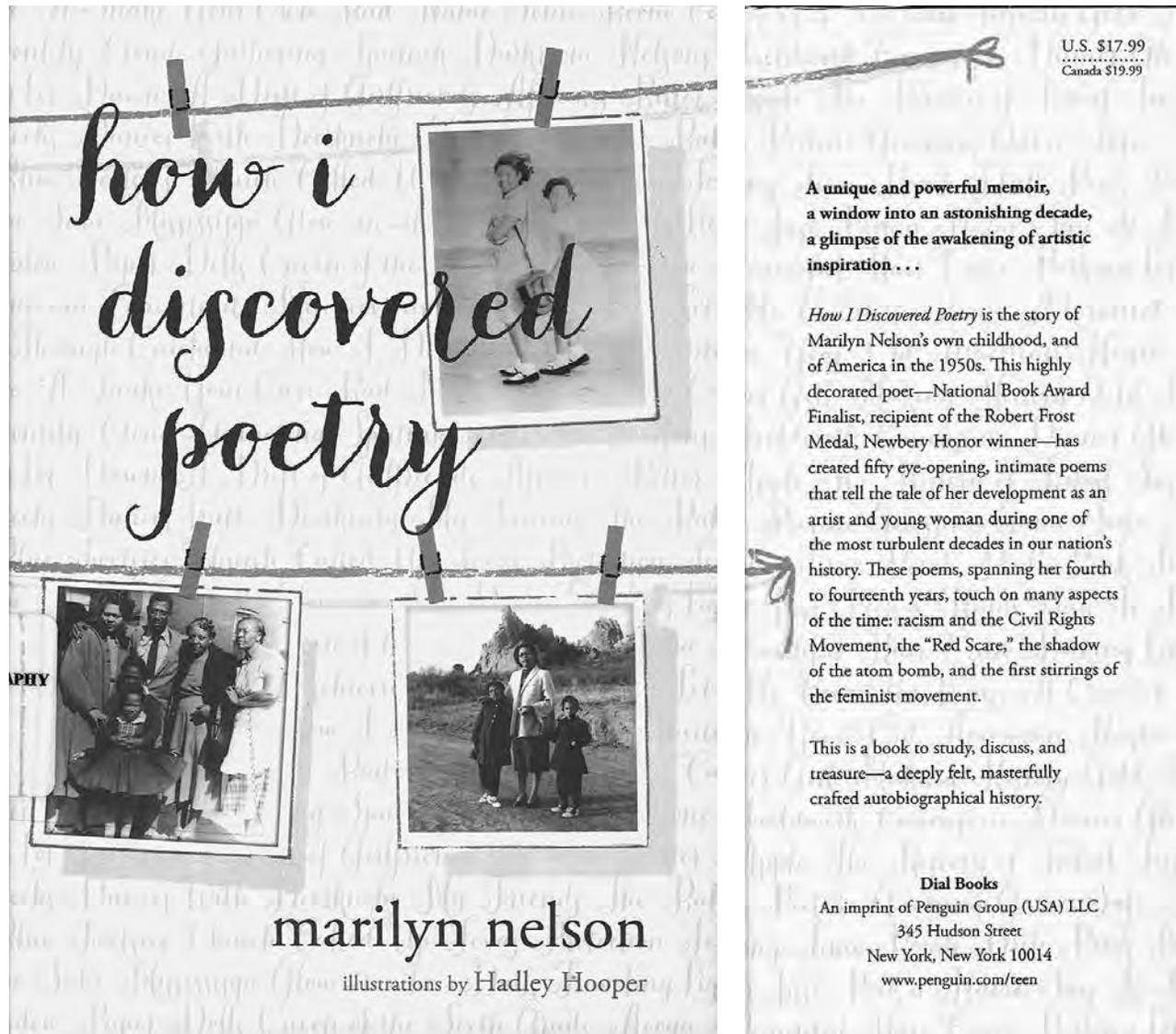
Nelson: It's always so humbling to be aware of those who came before us. In the African American tradition, because we have this unavoidable confrontation with a very painful history, it is humbling because it makes you feel, "Oh, well gosh. If they did that, what am I complaining about? Why am I upset because the car isn't starting? At least I'm not running through the woods with bloodhounds on my heels." So it's a humbling experience and it's also a prideful experience to look at the lives of people who rose above difficult situations.

SOA: Your poem "Photographs of the Medusa" alludes to an ancient mythical figure to discuss the nature of evil in the modern world. Other than the Medusa, are there any classical mythological figures whose stories reverberate for you today?

Nelson: I can't think of any off hand, but there is some kind of fundamental truth involved in every one of the mythologies that have survived. I don't know whether we see things differently because of those myths or whether things just fit the myths, but there's a lot of wisdom to be learned from reading mythology. Maybe because you're at School of the Arts you are reading mythology more than most students, but I don't think I really became seriously aware of *Greek* mythology, at least, until I was in college. If you read Jung you see that it's all archetypal. These are things that influence everything we do and everything we think. Everything we see, we see because of these archetypes.

SOA: On a somewhat related topic, the allusions in your work are also frequently biblical. Are there particular books of the Bible or biblical passages that hold particular importance for you?

Nelson: I did a version of the Book of Jonah only because my friend Pamela Espeland was editing a book about the Bible. She called me and said she had just read the Book of Jonah, and it was really funny. She thought I should try to rewrite it to capture the humor. Otherwise, I don't think I'd been that aware of Jonah. But I read it and saw what she was talking about and worked with it. I know I have one poem that talks about the Book of Job, but those are all archetypes, again. They're important books of the Bible. It'd be kind of interesting to write about the Book of Tobit, that nobody knows anything about [*laughing*], but I don't know anything about it either, so.



Dust jacket and front flap for Nelson's 2014 book (Lexington County Public Library)

SOA: One more question about allusions. You've written book-length poetic tributes to Emmett Till, George Washington Carver, and the racially integrated female big band, Sweethearts of Rhythm. But even shorter poems such as "Tuskegee Airfield," "Star-Fix," and others frequently make historical references. Do you conduct extensive research for much of your poetry? And if you do, in what ways have new discoveries affected your work?

Nelson: All of the poems I've written about historical events are seriously researched. There's a poem in my next book of new and selected poems about stopping at a Confederate cemetery in Tennes-

see. I actually stopped there, and the things that are described in the poem are there at the cemetery. But I went home and did a lot of research about the battle that went on there, how these men died, and who they were opposing. So, yes, I do a lot of research.

SOA: Critics have praised your tendency to capture moments in the lives of American heroes. How do you define a hero, and who would you consider to be some of the great heroes and heroines of your lifetime?

Nelson: A hero is somebody who is put into a situation in which he or she has to make a choice

whether to risk losing everything, his or her life even, or not. I have a feeling that many more people are *potential* heroes, who have never been asked to make this kind of choice. I have been thinking about heroes lately because I'm getting ready to write a book about the Tuskegee Airmen. We think of heroes as people who risk their lives, such as military heroes, or people who rise above difficult circumstances. But I've been thinking more about a conversation I had years ago with one of my high-school friends who was in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. He told me about what they did, what he saw, and what he experienced as a marine. He kept coming back to one man who was the chaplain of his unit, who went into battle unarmed to rescue people. If they were wounded, he was the one who would run out under fire and pull them in. He was killed doing this. He was killed rescuing somebody while he himself was unarmed. That is more heroic than any other kind of heroism I could think of.

SOA: After reading several deeply moving poems of yours such as "Mama's Promise" and "My Second Birth," which deal with intimate, emotional themes related to motherhood, I wanted to ask, how do you manage to avoid sentimentality in your work?

Nelson: [*Long Pause*] I don't know. I suppose you avoid it by learning how to recognize it and then cutting it out. I think a lot of people who write sentimental poetry have no idea what sentimentality is. We like *sentiment*, but I think maybe the difference is that *sentiment* takes the reader *into* the experience to *feel* what the writer is trying to describe. Sentimentality makes you see it in ways that you've seen it many other times. It's like taking you to a picture of a feeling rather than helping you to feel the feeling.

SOA: You shift between free verse and formal verse easily. What governs your decision to choose one or the other?

Nelson: Well, I started writing in free verse because it was the only kind of verse that anybody was writing at the time. Only a few holdouts were writing in rhyme and meter. I tried to get somebody to teach me to write in rhyme and meter, and I couldn't find anybody. I had to learn how to do it on my own. I started by writing fifty sonnets, and once I had done that, I was hooked. Now it's very hard for me not to write in iambic pentameter. I have to really slap my hand. "No! No more sonnets!" So I mostly write in rhyme and meter. It's very rare for me not to write in rhyme and meter.

SOA: Many of your formal poems, such as "Balance" and "Chosen," have a measured, yet resonating, emotional effect that I imagine takes time to hone. How many drafts do you usually write before you achieve the effect you desire?

Nelson: Oh, wow, I don't know. I used to keep all of my drafts and staple them together, and then take them into my creative-writing classes and say, "This is work. I've got three inches of drafts." And then a computer kind of changes that because you don't have to print out every change. But, yes, a lot of drafts. Sometimes I don't even know where a poem is going until ten or twenty drafts in. It turns out to be part of the writing process, finding out what the poem wants to grow into. I had a writing experience once with my former husband. I was writing a poem, and it was a serious poem about a black woman's rage. I showed him this poem, and he said "I know that you think this is a serious poem, but I think it's funny." Oh, I was so mad. [*Laughter*] I worked on about five or six more drafts, trying to make it sound angry, and each time he looked at it, he said, "I still think it's funny." And finally I decided to allow it to be funny, and it's one of the funniest poems I've written. People laugh every time I read it. But I didn't know that.

SOA: What poem is that?

Nelson: It's "Women's Locker Room."

SOA: I look forward to reading it. Thank you.

Nelson: Thank *you*. All of your questions are really, really wonderful. And difficult. [*Laughter*] I feel like I'm defending my Ph.D. dissertation. [*Laughter*]

SOA: Your poetry is filled with sound devices such as assonance, consonance, and alliteration, as in a line like "and snip his minuscule nails / with my vicious-looking scissors" from "Mama's Promise," which itself contains an internal rhyme in its title. Is your incorporation of these devices a natural process or do you work it into the poem in later stages?

Nelson: Oh, both. The language offers you things sometimes. Why would you refuse them? But then sometimes you have to push things together either to find them, or to highlight them so that people can notice them. Every time I read that poem, I notice "vicious-looking scissors," and that's just what they are, you know? They're vicious-looking. Look at nail scissors. For me that's such a mouthful of vicious sounds.

SOA: In your poem “Churchgoing,” the narrator refers to “the dusty creeds” of a “dying cult” and expresses the need to find the way back to what Christianity has lost. What aspects of traditional religion do you feel have been lost in modern Christianity?

Nelson: That poem describes a Sunday morning service in a Lutheran Church in a small town in Minnesota. I was thinking of some of the fundamentals that have been lost. American Christianity has become such a safe, middle-of-the-road religion. We aren’t required to be heroic, for example. We aren’t required to take a stand about anything. The trip to Mexico that I mentioned earlier was life-changing. We took a course taught by Benedictine nuns who do liberation work with the very, very poor. What we saw happening there was, in my opinion, a truer form of what I think Christianity is about: serving the poor, giving up things, not going to the mall and filling up with stuff, but going out and serving other people, feeding His sheep. There are many things that I think are missing in contemporary religion, but that’s certainly one of them.

SOA: Touching on a similar theme, we read Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese,” in which the narrator says, “You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.” The narrator of “Churchgoing,” however, prescribes a different moral outlook, stating that “to be a Christian one must bear a cross.” Do you feel that a truly spiritual life requires sacrifice?

Nelson: I, like everyone else, love Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese” that ends by saying you just have to “let your animal body love what it loves,” and take its place in the cycles of the planet’s living things. I love the poem, but I both do and don’t agree with it. Sacrifice is a way of transcending our physical nature in service to our higher nature. Sacrifices don’t have to be bloody or extreme. Fasting once in a while, as Muslims do at Ramadan, and Christians used to do for Lent—pushing the body and its appetites back for a while, as an act of spiritual discipline—well, I believe that’s good for you. You don’t have to live on one bean a day for all of your life, but taking and fulfilling a little vow, for example, not to eat sweets or pizza for two weeks, gives you a deepened understanding of yourself.

SOA: Your poems always reward the reader for taking the time to read them, which isn’t the way I’m affected by all contemporary poetry. What do

you consider necessary to the composition of a good poem?

Nelson: I don’t know. Having an interesting starting point? I don’t know. I figure that if they interest *me*, if they satisfy *me*, then maybe they would interest another reader. You start a poem and it’s like a little journey that takes you someplace. And you have to be willing to be taken where a poem wants to take you and to learn what the poem wants you to learn. Somehow it feels like the truest thing I can say is that the poem requires the poet to surrender somehow to the poem. You surrender part of yourself and part of your control and allow the poem to have its own life. I don’t know. It sounds like BS. [Laughter]

SOA: Not at all. So once you write a first draft, do you find that the poem becomes a real entity and is capable of taking you to unexpected destinations as you continue to work on it?

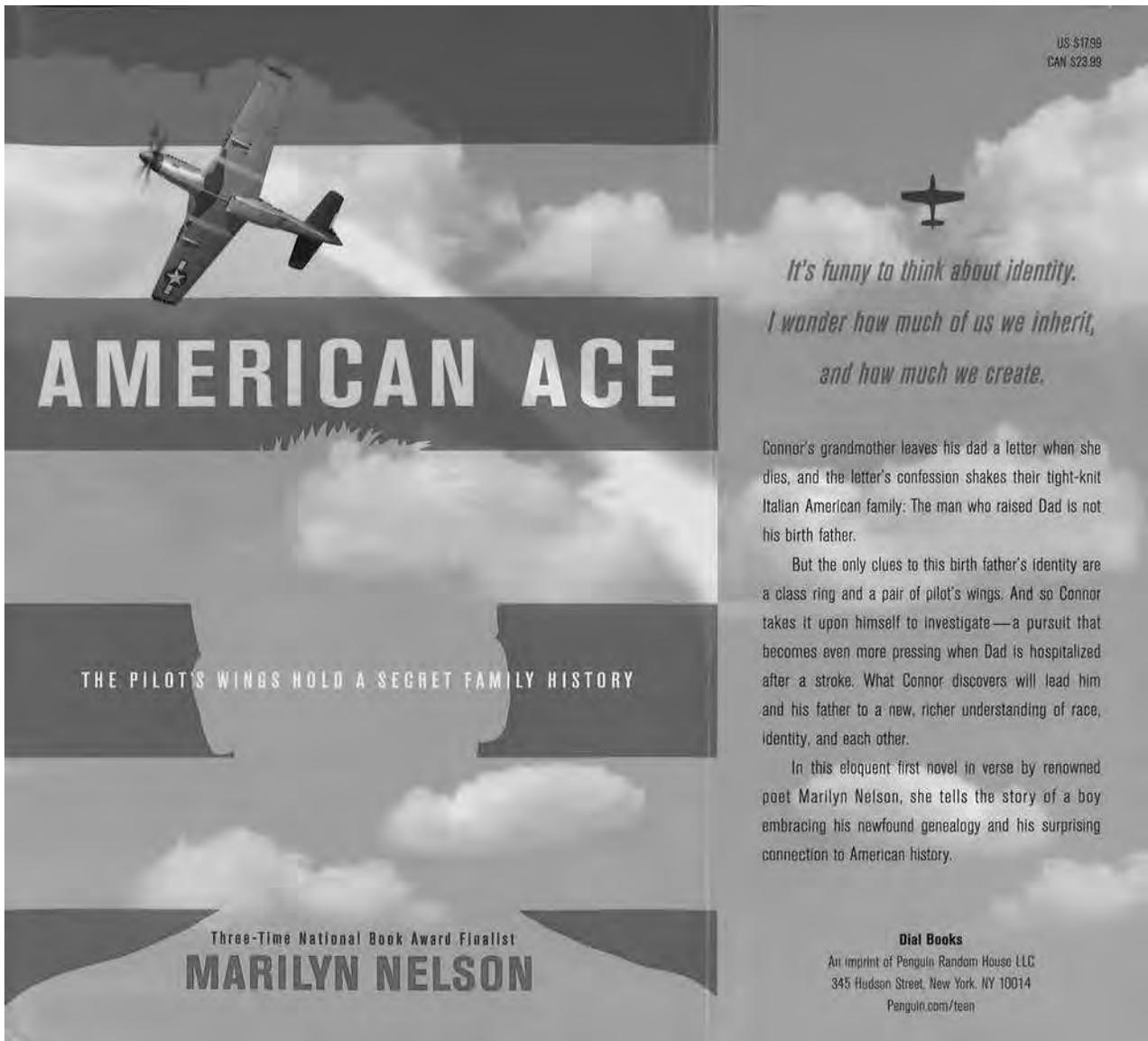
Nelson: It sometimes requires more than a first draft, and sometimes several drafts. Recently, I wrote a series of poems as part of another collaboration with a visual artist. She does watercolor paintings of herself as other women. She was working on a series of paintings of herself as famous nuns who were artists. And I wrote poems in the voices of these famous artist nuns. So it required me to do a lot of research. Who are these women? What was the period like? One of them is living in the eleventh century in Germany, and one of them is living in eighteenth-century Japan. I had to learn something from each one of them.

SOA: I’ve noticed some of your characters are drawn from real life, but others appear to be imagined. Do you find it easier to draw your work from real life, and how do you go about creating a character from scratch?

Nelson: Which characters seem imagined?

SOA: I was thinking particularly of Diverne from “Balance” and “Chosen,” which another student mentioned earlier, and other poems that originally appeared in *Homeplace*.

Nelson: Oh, no, she’s my attempt to understand what little I know about her. She was my Great, Great, I think three *Great* Grandmothers. I didn’t know her, so I had to make her up, but the name is real and the relationship is real as far as I know. The family story is that she had one of these problematic rela-



Dust jacket and front flap for Nelson's 2016 book (Lexington County Public Library)

tionships with a white man. They had two children together, and the family story is that this was a love story. It wasn't a plantation rape. I just tried to tell it the way the family believes it happened. I don't think I've made up characters. Most of what I write is historical, based on historical research. I think most of the stories in the poems you have read are as true as I know, other than those involving characters like Hecuba and Polyxena, who were from Euripides' original play *Hecuba*. Other than that, the characters are real, even poems like "Is She Okay?" or "Beauty Shop," which are based on something that happened to one of my friends.

SOA: Since you've confirmed that all of these characters are based on real people, can you elaborate a little bit on Aunt Geneva?

Nelson: Aunt Geneva, yes, she was one of my Grandmother's sisters. She never married, and as the poem ["The Ballad of Aunt Geneva"] says, she was the wild one. I heard a tape of my mother interviewing one of her other aunts when she was in her late eighties, and she said [*mimicking her great aunt*], "Geneva was very highly sexed." And when I was doing research about the place, I went to the hometown of the family in Kentucky, and stayed at the home place. There was a woman who was living in

our family house, who had lived with all of my great aunts when they were old. They all lived to be maybe ninety-four, something like that, and she told me that Geneva had fallen in love as a young woman, and it was an impossible situation, so they never were able to marry, and she had a life of bitterness, but at the end of her life they were still lovers, this old couple. He came regularly to visit her, and then they would have these noisy fights, which ended with great tenderness. Now this woman told me this. I don't know if it's true. I just accepted what she told me because I think it's a great story.

SOA: You also refer to your more immediate family members in your poems. Other than influencing the content of much of your work, how has your family directly supported or shaped your poetry?

Nelson: I was encouraged from a very early age to be a poet. My mother decided I was a poet. I was a sensitive child. I cried at sunsets and beautiful flowers. My mother always said, "Oh, don't worry about Marilyn. She's our sensitive child. She's our poet." So I was encouraged in that direction, and my siblings are also artists. My sister is a theatre artist. She started as an actor, but she's now more mostly a director, and my brother is a jazz musician. Our parents encouraged all of us to follow our dreams and to become artists. And it's nice to be in a family of artists, although it would be even nicer if artists made more money. [Laughter]

SOA: Your poetry includes references to writers such as Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. Who are the writers that have meant the most to you?

Nelson: I love Emily Dickinson. She's toward the top of my list. I love Rainer Maria Rilke, the great German-language poet. I love Wisława Szymborska, the Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize about fifteen years ago. I love Robert Hayden, James Weldon Johnson. I don't know if this is leading anywhere; they're just a few names. But I love reading a poet whose work takes you some place, as is the case with the poets I really like, such as Dickinson, and Rilke, and Szymborska. You read *one* poem and it's enough food for thought to keep you occupied for two weeks. You don't need to sit down and read five poems. One poem is enough.

SOA: Your poem "How I Discovered Poetry," like many of your poems, conveys the difficulty of growing up African American in the late 1950s and 1960s, when integration was being implemented in schools.

Did literature provide comfort for you despite the insensitivity of the Mrs. Purdys of the world?

Nelson: Oh, Mrs. Purdy. [Laughter] Yes, I was a bookish child. I could lose myself in a book, which is a great talent for a child who is moving around a lot.

SOA: The recent fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington drew attention to the fact that many women were pivotal forces behind the event; yet, they were not allowed to march with the men. And only one female, Daisy Bates, was allowed to speak. How much do you feel that America has changed in the fifty years since this event?

Nelson: Well, one of the things that have changed is that it couldn't happen that way now. Not only would fifty percent of the speakers be women, but a lot of them would be out, gay or lesbian. The whole world has changed. It's amazing how much the United States has changed in these fifty years.

SOA: In what ways have you seen poetry change over your lengthy career, and do you feel modern technology has helped or hurt contemporary poetry?

Nelson: One change is that there are more formalists than there were fifty years ago, but there still is a very strong prejudice against traditional poetry forms. There are poets whose work is created for performance only, not for the page, which is an interesting trend, I think. About three or four years ago there was a brief fad called Flarf, poetry that came into existence only *because* of the technology. It didn't last too long. I suppose there are probably people e-mailing collaborative poems around that others could add to. The University of Buffalo used to have a very elaborate website, with experimental, sort of technological, poetry. I don't know if it's still up. Some of it's great, but I don't keep up with it, because I'm a dinosaur. [Laughter]

SOA: In an interview with the National Book Foundation, you said that poetry was the answer to your first spiritual search and that much of your inspiration from poetry came at an early age. Was this youthful encounter one of the reasons you write poetry for all ages? How is what you hope children take away from your poems different from what you hope adults take away?

Nelson: Hmm, okay, so that's about twenty questions *disguised* as one. [Laughter] Yes, I suppose my early discovery of poetry has influenced my sense of

what poetry can do. I would like to write a kind of poetry that would have moved me when I was—how old are you?

SOA: I'm seventeen.

Nelson: Seventeen, okay. So, yes, poetry that would have moved me when I was a teenager. I feel like that's the best audience, people who are really open to poetry. I've been very happy to have my poems published as young-adult books, as some of them are. Do I want young people to get something different from poetry than older people? Well, young people may be learning values for the first time. Older people may be rediscovering things through a poem. What I would hope is that people will read my poems while they're fifteen or sixteen or seventeen, and then read them again ten and twenty years later, and each time they read them, be moved in a slightly different way. That's what any poet hopes for: not only the reading but the *re*-reading.

SOA: As was discussed earlier, your poems are very pleasing to hear. How much of a role has music played in your life, and what musicians or singers stand out to you?

Nelson: I guess music has played something of a role in my life, but not a particularly large one. I liked Motown when Motown was Motown. I liked the Beatles when the Beatles were the Beatles. [Laughter] I like a lot of jazz. I like a lot of classical music. I'm a dilltante when it comes to music. But I do like composing poems that have a melodic line. Sometimes I can hear the melody of the line before I have the words. So I can say, "Well I want something that's going to say, *Da—Da-Da-Da.*" Then I can find the words that are going to sound that way. I am glad you seem to be able to hear the melodies of the lines. That's *really* important to me.

SOA: In some of the biographical articles that we have read, you are mentioned alongside such poets as Rita Dove and Thylia Moss, other poets who have helped to popularize the contemporary African American poetry movement. I have been studying the work of Kevin Young, who is also associated with this movement. Have you interacted at all with Mr. Young?

And how do you feel he and other poets have sustained an African American poetic tradition?

Nelson: There is so much movement right now in the world of African American poetry. I'd say it's probably even livelier now than it was during the Harlem Renaissance. It's *amazing* to see it. Much of it is the result of Cave Canem. That movement is changing the landscape of American poetry. I've met Kevin Young several times, a nice guy. The last time I heard him read, he was reading food poems, which were really funny. He's the curator of a poetry collection at Emory, which gives him some leverage to honor other poets by inviting them to read. So I think he's in a very interesting and potentially important position. And then Rita Dove: she's a queen of American poetry.

SOA: Speaking of Rita Dove, two of your poems are included in the recently published *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, which Dove edited, placing you in the ranks of the greatest American poets. If you could, what might you say to Mrs. Purdy now?

Nelson: Ha! [Laughter] That's not printable. [Laughter] The same thing I would've said, fifty years ago—God, I hated that woman. [Laughter] Being in an anthology is an honor. It's great, and I am so pleased that Rita included me. But being in an anthology is partly political. It depends on who knows you, who likes your work. It's not the ultimate, *yet*. Being in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, now that would be something. But, that's down the line. But, yes, I am sure Mrs. Purdy, if she saw my life, would say, [laughs] "yes, but, eh?" I don't think anything I've done would have particularly impressed her.

SOA: Well, thank you for inspiring *us* with your poems and with this wonderful conversation.

Nelson: Thank you, thank you. It was great talking to all of you guys.

SOA: Great talking to *you*. We appreciate everything you've shared. It was a great treat for us.

Nelson: Thank you. It was a great treat for me. Enjoy the rest of the school year. [Applause]