



The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems (L. E. Phillabaum Poetry Award)

Marilyn Nelson

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Soaring images, rhythmic language, and wry humor come together in these three narrative poems that explore travel from an African American historical and social perspective. A cab ride turns into an amazing encounter with the driver, an amateur physicist whose ideas about space and time travel spark the poet's musings on chutzpah and artistic ambition. A trip to Triolet, a Creole village in the Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius, leads the poet to ponder the past and present as she reflects on the ironic complexities of the slave trade and its legacy shared by so many peoples. And in "The Cachoeira Tales," longing to take her family on a journey to "some place sanctified by the Negro soul," the poet finds herself in Brazil's Bahia, along with a theater director, a jazz musician, a retired commercial pilot, an activist, a university student, and two mysterious African American women whom they meet along the way. In rhymed couplets, each pilgrim tells a story, and the result is a rollicking, sensual exploration of spirit and community, with a nod to Chaucer and to traditional Trickster tales.

Using her remarkable ability to educate and inspire, Marilyn Nelson demonstrates the power of travel to transform our imaginations. We have long known that travel broadens; in these poems, it also deepens and makes wiser.

Joined skin to skin, we moved like molecules
in the great, impossible miracle
of atmosphere, swaying to the music,
all eyes on the stage, all hearts attuning
themselves in beautiful polyrhythmy,
one shaking booty. On one side of me
a young man danced; I felt his muscled warmth
flow into mine, his pure, sexual strength.
On my other sides young women danced, whose curves
bumped me softly, dancing without reserve,
hands waving in the air, releasing scent
fragrant as nard. We danced in reverent,
silent assent to the praise-song of drums.
-- from "Olodum" of "The Cachoeira Tales"

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