



Illustration: Simón Prades

Reach

Right off I hear him singing, the strings
of his old guitar hemming the darkness
as before—late nights on the front porch—
the mountains across the valley blurred
to outline. We are at it again, father
and daughter, deep in our cups, rehearsing
the long years between us. In the distance
I hear the foghorn call of bullfrogs,
envoys from the river of lamentation
my father is determined to cross. Already
I know where this is headed: how many times
has the night turned toward regret? My father
saying, *if only I'd been a better husband*
she'd be alive today, saying, *Gwen and I*
would get back together if she were alive.
It's the same old song. He is Orpheus
trying to bring her back with the music
of his words, lines of a poem drifting now
into my dream. Picking the low chords,
my father leans into the neck of the guitar,
rolls his shoulders until he's lost in it—
the song carrying him across the porch
and down into the damp grass. Even asleep,
I know where he is going. I cannot call
him back. Through the valley the blacktop
winds like a river, and he is stepping into it,
walking now toward the other side where
she waits, my mother, just out of reach.

The National Poem

NATASHA
TRETHERWEY



Like much of her work, Natasha Trethewey's "Reach," the final poem in her forthcoming *Monument: Poems New & Selected*, invokes the figure of her father, who was also a poet. It also recalls "The Southern Crescent," from her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *The Native Guard*, a poem in memory of her mother that enshrines several family journeys on that fabled railroad line. Taken together, these poems demonstrate that Trethewey, the U.S. Poet Laureate from 2012 to 2014, is one of America's foremost composers of hauntingly beautiful elegies. "Always there is something more to know," she writes in her poem "Illumination," "what lingers at the edge of thought/awaiting illumination." Here, it's many things: the darkness beyond their porch, the ways a marriage might have turned out, a vision of the afterlife.

By Alice Quinn