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22nd Heinz Awards Honors Natasha Trethewey for Luminous Writings That Draw From Personal Narrative and History of the American South

Trethewey lauded for poetry that explores memory, history and racial injustice in America

PITTSBURGH, September 14, 2017—The Heinz Family Foundation today named Natasha Trethewey the recipient of the 22nd Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities category. Ms. Trethewey is recognized for her achievements as a poet and writer whose exquisitely crafted works intertwine personal and public histories of loss, grief, joy and hope.

As part of the accolade, Ms. Trethewey will receive an unrestricted cash award of \$250,000.

“Ms. Trethewey’s writing captivates us with its power, and its ability to personalize and fearlessly illuminate stories of our past as a people and a nation,” said Teresa Heinz, Chairman of the Heinz Family Foundation. “We honor her not only for her body of work, but for her contributions as a teacher and mentor dedicated to inspiring the next generation of writers.”

A two-time U.S. Poet Laureate (2012 to 2014), Ms. Trethewey draws much of her writing from extensive research. Her poetry is often anchored in the complex history of racial and social inequity in the American South, and in memories of her own experiences growing up in Mississippi as the daughter of an African-American mother and a white father whose marriage union was illegal in the state at that time. Effortlessly moving from free verse to more traditional forms, she crafts poems that are at once poignant and painful, yet infused with elements of joy and optimism.

“When you are a poet, you hope that readers take pleasure in the language and the musicality of a poem, but beyond that, my writing is about my investigations of history, and I hope that readers come away with knowledge that they may not have had before,” said Ms. Trethewey. “I hope they are given an opportunity to see inside themselves, that the poems become a mirror through which they might reflect deeply on their own place in American history.”

Ms. Trethewey's first collection of poetry, *Domestic Work*, was inspired by her grandmother, who began work as a housekeeper in 1937, and later worked as an elevator operator, beautician, factory worker and seamstress. *Domestic Work* was selected as the winner of the inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize, awarded to the first “exceptional” book of an African-American poet. In her second collection, *Bellocq’s Ophelia: Poems*, a novella in verse, Ms. Trethewey tells the fictional story of a mixed-race prostitute seen in an historic photo taken by the photographer E.J. Bellocq in New Orleans in the early 20th century. Presented as a series of letters and diary entries by the young woman, named Ophelia by Ms. Trethewey, the collection has been praised for its sensitivity and its illuminating beauty, and was named a notable book by the American Library Association.

Ms. Trethewey’s third volume, *Native Guard: Poems*, won her the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In the collection she explores her personal family history growing up as a biracial child in the South, and the

loss, at 19, of her mother, who was murdered by her then ex-husband, a troubled Vietnam veteran who had been Ms. Trethewey's stepfather for 10 years. *Native Guard* juxtaposes these experiences with the forgotten history of the Louisiana Native Guards, a black Civil War regiment, paying homage to those who served, and to the memories of her own life and childhood.

“In writing *Native Guard*, I researched the history of black Union soldiers who were stationed off the coast of my home town,” said Ms. Trethewey. “Of course, historians have been doing work for years on black contributions to the Civil War, but because of the small number of monuments to that history, many people don't know that nearly 200,000 African Americans fought in the Civil War. As historian Eric Foner has pointed out, of the hundreds of monuments north and south, only a handful make any mention of these black soldiers. Growing up in the South, I found myself in a kind of psychological exile, as so many of the monuments are to Confederate soldiers, segregationists, white supremacists—opponents of civil rights and African-American equality. They are constant reminders of a kind of exclusion, of second-class citizenship for African Americans. That is one of the things I have tried to contend with in my work—what it means to grow up within the lost-cause ideology of the Deep South, and with the national, willed amnesia around the meaning of the Civil War, its aftermath and the way we remember our shared history.”

As one of the younger poets laureate, Ms. Trethewey was also one of the most active, often meeting the public and holding office hours at the Library of Congress, and working on the *PBS NewsHour*, with correspondent Jeffrey Brown, on *Where Poetry Lives*, a series of on-location specials that examined societal issues through poetry. Reflecting on poetry programs held for middle school students in Detroit, and with young people in Seattle who had been incarcerated as juveniles, she is quick to state that poetry continues to resonate, even among a generation deeply connected to visual media.

Ms. Trethewey's most recent works include a short memoir of the South under siege, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*; *Thrall*, a collection of poetry; and *Congregation*, a chapbook of poems. In September 2017, she joined the faculty of Northwestern University as Board of Trustees Professor of English following 16 years teaching at Emory University.

Established to honor the memory of U.S. Senator John Heinz, the 22nd Heinz Awards this year recognizes those who have made significant contributions in five distinct areas of great importance to Senator Heinz: Arts and Humanities; Environment; Human Condition; Public Policy; and Technology, the Economy and Employment. The Heinz Awards has recognized 133 individuals and awarded more than \$26 million to the honorees. For more information about the awardees visit <http://heinzawards.net/2017>.

In addition to Ms. Trethewey, the 22nd Heinz Awards honored the following individuals, who will receive their awards in Pittsburgh on October 18, 2017:

- **Environment: Gregory Asner, Ph.D., Stanford, California**
- **Human Condition: Angela Blanchard, Houston, Texas**
- **Public Policy: Mona Hanna-Attisha, M.D., Flint, Michigan**
- **Technology, the Economy and Employment: Joseph DeSimone, Ph.D., Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Redwood City, California**

EDITORS/REPORTERS: To obtain photos of Ms. Trethewey or any of the other recipients, please contact Abby Manishor at amanishor@burness.com or 917-539-3308.

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About the Heinz Awards

Established by Teresa Heinz in 1993 to honor the memory of her late husband, U.S. Senator John Heinz, the Heinz Awards celebrates the accomplishments and spirit of the Senator by recognizing the extraordinary achievements of individuals in the areas of greatest importance to him. The awards, administered by the Heinz Family Foundation, recognize individuals for their contributions in the areas of Arts and Humanities; Environment; Human Condition; Public Policy; and Technology, the Economy and Employment. Nominations are submitted by invited experts, who serve anonymously, and are reviewed by jurors appointed by the Heinz Family Foundation. The jurors make recommendations to the Board of Directors, which subsequently selects the Award recipients. For more information on the Heinz Awards, visit www.heinzawards.net.

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