

A young poet shaped by religious language

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[Philip C. Maurer](#) interviews Nate Marshall in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



Nate Marshall. Photo by Mercedes Zapata.

*[Nate Marshall](#) is a poet and rapper whose work about growing up on the South Side of Chicago, *Wild Hundreds*, was awarded the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. He is a member of the poetry collective *Dark Noise* and coeditor of *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*.*

You were raised in a black Lutheran church. How has that influenced your poetry?

My entire context for Lutheranism is via black folks. I've actually never been to a white Lutheran church.

There are a few ways that shaped me. Number one: church was one of the first places where I would read and recite things in public, including poetry.

Another is this: when I was nine or ten years old, I decided I needed to read the King James Bible. I had gotten hung up on this question of incest. I thought, "OK, Adam and Eve were the only two people. They had kids, and their kids had kids. So that means brothers and sisters and cousins would have been having kids. Isn't that wrong?" When I asked my pastor, he responded, "It was a different time; they had different morals." I don't know that I believed his explanation, but I remember appreciating that my pastor took me seriously and tried to engage my ideas.

The King James language began shaping and reshaping me. It's beautiful. It's regal. There are ways in which it's rigid, but I think the process of having difficult, challenging language in my mouth as a young person, and wrestling with it, has definitely shaped how I consider language as a writer.

For me, writing poetry and essays is a process of inquiry, of wrestling with ideas. I would be so different if I had been told at that early moment that my inquiry was a thing I should be ashamed of, or a thing that I should temper.

You've talked about the Lutheran concept of grace as offering a "foundational freedom."

One of the fundamental principles in my life is this notion of grace, and so much of that comes from being raised Lutheran. There's space for morality, and that is important. But the fundamental idea is that our own good works won't save us. Salvation is given because of this tremendous love, this tremendous grace. This immeasurable goodness that I don't deserve, that I can't hope to deserve, shapes how I move in the world, and how I engage with other people.

What else about your Lutheran upbringing do you carry with you?

Lutheranism is liturgical. There's a lot of reading and responding. Being in a tradition that valued literacy was really important for my early development. One of my

friends said recently that reading is often the closest thing to prayer that he has. Something about that resonated with me.

Some of your poems also have a liturgical, repetitive quality to them. For example, “pallbearers” is a sestina that you don’t announce as a sestina. Yet the repetition is central to the poem. For example, each verse has a hard-hitting line with the word *coffin*: “Dom, Kenny, Shaun, Bart & i were close as a coffin.” “We covered for him like a closed coffin.” “The way he spoke about his father cold, a coffin.”

I enjoy writing in forms at times, and a lot of the forms I’m attracted to are those that repeat in ways that aren’t always obvious, like the sestina. A teacher of mine said, “Look, you don’t have to name it—just do it.” Calling it “Pallbearers: A Sestina” would be like doing a crossover dribble and then backing up. It’s showy for no reason.

In the poem “recycling,” you seem to be wrestling with a feeling of dislocation: “you’re not from projects & the ones in Chicago seem worse / but there’s comfort in being around plainspoken folk.” How do you locate yourself?

I think that notion of location and dislocation, even the question of home, is pretty central to what it means to be black in America.

I’m from Chicago, but my family didn’t originate in Chicago. My grandparents and my great-grandparents on one side all came to Chicago from the Deep South, in some cases under duress. Those folks from Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana are not from there—and ultimately are from Africa.

Going to school in Nashville let me think about that in different ways. My best friend there was from Alabama. Being in relationship with him, I had to contend with the fact that my family got to Chicago as part of the history of racial terrorism. His family likely has a very similar relationship with racial terrorism, but people in his family made a distinct decision to stay.

I also think about how much southernness was carried north but then got frozen in time. It reminds me of the way that Afrikaans might be closer to 19th-century Dutch than to modern Dutch. Such is the nature of dislocation.

What role does faith play in your life now?

In college, I attended a Christian Methodist Episcopal church. I developed a real appreciation for mainline black denominations as organizing spaces that have consistently worked toward the process of liberation in this country, since slavery at least.

Every so often, I still go to the church I grew up in. I still very much consider myself a Christian, and someone working in a Christian faith tradition, a Christian intellectual tradition. I still do devotional pieces, keep Lent, those kinds of things. I'm not an active member of a church, but I'd like to be.

Speaking of community, you're a founding member of Dark Noise Collective, which you've said values community over transaction. What do you mean by that, and why is it important to you?

I think artists face a moment of transition. It's one of the reasons why a lot of musicians' second albums suck. The first album is something they worked on for 25 years. When it's successful, people say, "Cool, I need you to do another album in 13 months."

Having a community of folks who don't just see you as someone with economic viability or prestige is important. You know they're invested in your art because they're invested in you as a person. If I say, "Actually, I'm done with this poetry stuff, I'm going to go work retail," these people will still be invested in me as a person. There's grace in that.

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