



Enlightenment

BY NATASHA TRETHERWEY

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:
his forehead white with illumination —

a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,
he was already linked to an affair
with his slave. Against a backdrop, blue

and ethereal, a wash of paint that seems
to hold him in relief, Jefferson gazes out
across the centuries, his lips fixed as if

he's just uttered some final word.

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though — *out*
of necessity, my father said — had to own

slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:

would have been impossible, my father said.

For years we debated the distance between

word and deed. I'd follow my father from book

to book, gathering citations, listening
as he named — like a field guide to Virginia —

each flower and tree and bird as if to prove

a man's pursuit of knowledge is greater
than his shortcomings, the limits of his vision.

I did not know then the subtext

of our story, that my father could imagine
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh —

the improvement of the blacks in body

*and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites* — or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*. When I think of this now,

I see how the past holds us captive,
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye:

my young father, a rough outline of the old man

he's become, needing to show me
the better measure of his heart, an equation

writ large at Monticello. That was years ago.

Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? — parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.

Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then — and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where*
we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us — white father, black daughter —
even as it renders us other to each other.

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