How I Discovered Poetry

By Marilyn Nelson

It was like soul-kissing, the way the words filled my mouth as Mrs. Purdy read from her desk. All the other kids zoned an hour ahead to 3:15, but Mrs. Purdy and I wandered lonely as clouds borne by a breeze off Mount Parnassus. She must have seen the darkest eyes in the room brim: The next day she gave me a poem she’d chosen especially for me to read to the all except for me white class. She smiled when she told me to read it, smiled harder, said oh yes I could. She smiled harder and harder until I stood and opened my mouth to banjo playing darkies, pickaninnies, disses and dats. When I finished my classmates stared at the floor. We walked silent to the buses, awed by the power of words.
