Citation (John Gatta)

“It was like soul-kissing, the way the words filled my mouth as Mrs. Purdy read from her desk.” That is how poet Marilyn Nelson recalled the moment in grade school when she first found herself – as she puts it – “awed by the power of words.” So when Professor Nelson’s talents as poet and educator later blossomed, she embraced as her own the vocation of living into, and sharing with others, the soul-stirring power of words. The fruit of such dedication is a career that has seen Professor Nelson publish more than a dozen books – several award-winning poetry volumes, as well as children’s books and translations. Named three times a finalist for the National Book Award, she has won numerous other honors including an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and recent election as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She has been the founder and director of Soul Mountain Retreat, a writers’ colony in Connecticut, and the Poet-in-Residence at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York. And she has held teaching posts at several colleges and universities, including a term at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where she dared to instruct army cadets – believe it or not – in the poetry and practice of meditation.

Uncommon in the range of her poetic musings, Professor Nelson writes with a literary voice that echoes with compassionate love the voices and experiences of others. She has written eloquently, for example, in the voice of her father, a Tuskegee airman in World War II, of George Washington Carver, of a 1930’s and 40’s all-female swing band called the Sweethearts of Rhythm, and of Abba Jacob, modeled on a French Benedictine monk and friend of hers living in Mauritius. Her fertile imagination has led her to address in her poems subjects ranging from her
own family history, as in her much-praised volume titled *The Homeplace*, through the searching reflections on love, loss, and contemplative spirituality that have stirred readers of her *Magnificat* volume, to a recovery of sometimes-unsettling episodes from African-American history in volumes such as *A Wreath for Emmett Till, Carver: A Life in Poems*, and *Fortune’s Bones: The Manumission Requiem*. But despite its willingness to confront violence and deep pain, Marilyn Nelson’s verse is ultimately a poetry of praise – luminescent in its earthiness, full of wit and play, and always accessible to readers.

During the Easter term of 2011, Sewanee was privileged to experience Professor Nelson’s work among us as Visiting Professor of English and Brown Foundation Fellow. A special benefit of having her here was her involvement in the Theatre Department’s production of her own translation-adaptation of the Greek classic *Hecuba* by Euripides. For her lifelong testimony to the force and beauty of literary imagination, to the soul of African-American experience, and to the resilience of the human spirit, The University of the South is honored to confer on Marilyn Rae Nelson the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*. 