

# NOT MY BONES

Marilyn Nelson



*Fortune* (2001), William B. Westwood.  
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I was not this body,  
I was not these bones.  
This skeleton was just my  
temporary home.

5 Elementary molecules<sup>1</sup> **converged** for a breath,  
then danced on beyond my individual death.  
And I am not my body,  
I am not my body.

We are brief **incarnations**,  
10 we are clouds in clothes.  
We are water respirators,  
we are how earth knows.  
I bore<sup>2</sup> light passed on from an original flame;  
while it was in my hands it was called by my name.  
15 But I am not my body,  
I am not my body. ©

**converge** (kən-vûrj') v. to  
come together in one  
place; meet

**incarnation**  
(ĭn'-kär-nā'-shən) n. a  
bodily form

© **WORD CHOICE**  
Reread lines 3–6. What  
are they saying about  
our physical bodies?  
What words in lines 9–14  
suggest the same ideas?  
Add these to your chart.

1. **elementary molecules:** the smallest, most basic particles of substances.
2. **bore:** carried; transported.

You can own a man's body,  
 but you can't own his mind.  
 That's like making a bridle  
 20 to ride on the wind.  
 I will tell you one thing, and I'll tell you true:  
 Life's the best thing that can happen to you.  
 But you are not your body,  
 you are not your body.

25 You can own someone's body,  
 but the soul runs free.  
 It roams the night sky's  
 mute geometry.  
 You can murder hope, you can pound faith flat,  
 30 but like weeds and wildflowers, they grow right back.  
 For you are not your body,  
 you are not your body.

You are not your body,  
 you are not your bones.  
 35 What's **essential** about you  
 is what can't be owned.  
 What's essential in you is your longing to raise  
 your itty-bitty voice in the **cosmic** praise.  
 For you are not your body,  
 40 you are not your body. **D**

Well, I woke up this morning just so glad to be free,  
 glad to be free, glad to be free.  
 I woke up this morning in restful peace.  
 For I am not my body,  
 45 I am not my bones.  
 I am not my body,  
 glory hallelujah, not my bones,  
 I am not my bones. **E**

**essential** (ĭ-sĕn'shəl) *adj.*  
 having the qualities that  
 give something its true  
 identity

**cosmic** (kŏz'mik) *adj.*  
 universal; infinitely large

**COMMON CORE RL 4**

**D WORD CHOICE**  
 When poets choose a word, they consider the way it sounds, the way it affects the rhythm of a line, and sometimes even the way it looks on the page. They also consider the word's **connotation**, or the feelings and ideas associated with the word that go beyond its basic definition. In line 38, Marilyn Nelson chooses to use the word *itty-bitty* instead of *small*. How does her choice affect the line's meaning, rhythm, and tone?

**E SOUND DEVICES**  
 What lines in this poem have been most often repeated?