

Heginbotham Their Emily
Dickinsons: Selected Women
Poets Lit by Her Lamp

Gwendolyn Brooks and Tracy K. Smith
1917-2000 **b.1972**

Gwendolyn Brooks was the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize. Perhaps some of you heard her during her term as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (forerunner to the "Poet Laureate" position — the first Black woman to hold that position — much loved by Washington (and national) readers during that period.

Tracy K. Smith held the Poet Laureate from 2017-2018. Along with this last handout, I'm sending an article I was able to write about Smith after a delightful interview with her in two forms, the pdf from the Emily Dickinson Bulletin, slightly edited from the manuscript that I'm also sending.



These award-winning cross-cultural poets show the width of that circumference about which Dickinson spoke, the largeness of the world to which she sent her "letter." Our Dickinson focus will be wide; as we finish the class, I am painfully aware of what a small portion of her great work we have skimmed, but I hope this will lead you to wander through the Franklin edition on your own. For today, with introductions to these two poets, considerations of death, yes, and "power."

*I took my Power in my Hand –
And went against the World –
'Twas not so much as David – had –
But -- I was twice as bold –*

*I aimed my Pebble – but Myself
Was all the one that fell --
Was it Goliath – was too large –
Or was myself – too small?*

Fr660 F 30

*To be alive – is Power --
Existence – in itself --
Without a further function --
Omnipotence – Enough --*

*To be alive – and will! --
'Tis able as a God --
The Maker of Ourselves – be what --
Such being Finitude!*

Fr876 F39

Briefly on Gwendolyn Brooks: 1917-2000

B. Topeka, Kansas – father a janitor with musical talents; mother a teacher & trained musician (grandfather a runaway slave; father one year at Fisk – to be a doctor; GB's brother a painter)

At five weeks the family moved to Chicago – there most of her life

At thirteen published in *American Child*

At sixteen met James Weldon Johnson; he critiqued her work; published in the *Defender*; within two years – had 75 poems published there.

1936 graduated from Wilson Junior College; took terrible jobs

1938 met Henry Lowington Blakely II; married in 1941

1940 son Henry L. Blakely III born; daughter Nora born 1951

1941 with husband Henry attended classes taught by Inez Cunningham Stark in poetry-writing

1943 Won the Midwestern Writers' Conference poetry award

1945 Published *A Street in Bronzeville*

1945 *Mademoiselle* Merit Award & a Guggenheim Fellowship for '46, '47; other awards

1949 “ *Annie Allen* ; it won Pulitzer Prize in 1950

1953 *Maud Martha* (only novel); *The Bean Eaters* (honored her father)

With husband entertained many, including Langston Hughes, many others

1962 Taught at U of Chicago; then Columbia College in Chicago

1965 Honorary Litt.D. Lake Forest College

1966 Health problems; intensive travel/ reading – heart attack in 1971

1967 Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk: changed her work – influenced by Baraka, etc

1969-1973 Brooks/ Blakely had “a hiatus in the marriage”; he was an activist

1970 Gwendolyn Brooks Cultural Center opened at Western Illinois University

1973 Marriage restored, traveled with husband to Ghana;

When returned became honorary Consultant in American Letters at U of C

1976 First black woman elected to national Institute of Arts and Letters

1980 Read at the White House w/ 20 other distinguished poets – audaciously read “The Mother”

1981 Gwendolyn Brooks Junior High School dedicated

1985-86 Named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (**memorable lecture**)

2000 December died; large funeral at Rockefeller Chapel U of Ch; President Clinton letter read

“There can be no way of diminishing. . .the wholly singular achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks. . .She has ranked as a prime American imagination since her first collection. . .She has shown the ability to range from a modernist experimentalism (Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and Countee Cullen. . .) to a down-home intimacy of idiom drawn from blues, spirituals, jazz, and rap, and from the start, the example of Langston Hughes.’ A. Robert Lee in *Masterpieces of African American Literature*.”

“Across the years and volumes, Brooks’s poetry has struck readers with. . . a stunning juxtaposition of disparate objects and words. . . a masterful control of rhyme and meter; sophisticated use of formal and thematic irony. . .; and the delicate but striking translation of public events into memorable poetic details.’ *Norton Anthology African American Literature*. Eds Gates and McKay

“I – who have ‘gone the gamut’ from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun – am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress. I have hopes for myself.” Brooks in *Report From Part One*, 1970

Sampling of Gwendolyn Brooks
Sonnets of the Children of the Poor

1

People who have no children can be hard:
Attain a mail of ice and insolence:
Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
Hesitate in the hurricane to guard.
And when wide world is bitten and bewarred
They perish purely, waving their spirits hence
Without a trace of grace or of offense
To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-starred.
While through a throttling dark we others hear
The little lifting helplessness, the queer
Whimper-whine; whose unridiculous
Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.
And makes a curse. And makes a sugar of
The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.

2

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
But I lack access to my proper stone.
And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

3

And shall I prime my children, pray, to pray?
Mites, come invade most frugal vestibules
 crumbs,
Spectered with crusts of penitents' renewals
And all hysterics arrogant for a day.
Instruct yourselves here is no devil to pay.
Children, confine your lights in jellied rules;
Resemble graves; be metaphysical mules.
Learn Lord will not distort nor leave the fray.
Behind the scurrings of your neat motif

Malcolm X

Original.
Ragged-round
Rich-robust.

He had the hawk-man's eyes
We gasped.
We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making
 guttural the air
And pushing us to walls.

And in a soft and fundamental hour
A sourcery devout and vertical
Beguiled the world.

He opened us --
Who was a key,

Who was a man.
1968

The Bean Eaters

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering. . .
Remembering wioth tinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back
 Room that is full of beads
 and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco
 crumbs, vases and fringes.

I shall wait, if you wish: revise the psalm
If that should frighten you: sew up belief
If that should tear: turn, singularly calm
At forehead and at fingers rather wise,
Holding the bandage ready for your eyes.
1949

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

1960

The Mother

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you
did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no
hair,
The singers and workers that never handled
the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your
luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling
mother's eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the
voices of my dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could
Never suck.

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck

And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your
Marriages, aches, and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not
deliberate.

Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine? –
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be
Said?

You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
All.

Briefly on Tracy K. Smith (b. 1972)

b. in Falmouth< MA to teacher and engineer (father worked on Hubble Telescope)
raised in Fairfield, CA; influenced early by Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain
later influences Elizabeth Bishop, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, Yusef Komunyakaa, Rita Dove
1994 graduated from Harvard; taught thee by Helen Vendler, Henri Cole, Seamus Heaney
1997 earned MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia U
1997-1999 Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford U
m. Raphael Allison (second husband), professor at Bard College; three children
2002 Awarded Cave Canem Prize for *The Body's Question*. (for best 1st book by Af. Am. Writer)
2003 *The Body's Question*, Graywolf P,
2005 Awarded Whiting Award (for emerging writers)
2006 Began teaching at Princeton U (still there); member Phi Beta Kappa; Berlind Professor
2006 Awarded James Laughlin Award
2007 *Duende*, Graywolf P
2011 *Life on Mars*. Graywolf P Winner of Pulitzer Prize
2011 *Ordinary Light*, Knopf (memoir)
2017-2018 Two terms as Poet Laureate of the United States

Samples of Smith

From *The Body's Question*

Something Like Dying, Maybe

Last night, it was bright afternoon
Where I wandered. Pale faces all around me.
I walked and walked looking for a door,
For some cast-off garment, looking for myself
In the blank windows and the pale blank faces.

I found my wristwatch from ten years ago
And felt glad awhile.
When it didn't matter anymore being lost,
The sky clouded over and the pavement went white.
I stared at my hands. Like new leaves,
Light breaking through from behind.

Then I felt your steady breathing beside me
And the mess of blankets where we slept.
I woke, touching ground gently
Like a parachutist tangled in low branches.
All those buildings, those marvelous bodies
Pulled away as though they'd never known me.

Drought

The hydrangea begins as a small, bright world.
Mother buries rusty nails, and the flowers
Weep blue and pink. I am alone in the garden,
And like all else that is living, I lean into the sun

Each bouquet will cringe and die in time
While the dry earth watches. It is ugly,
And the earth is ugly to allow it. Still, the petals
Curl and drop. Mother calls it an exquisite waste

But there is no choice. I learn how:

Before letting go, open yourself completely.
Wait. When the heavens fail to answer,
Curse the heavens. Wither and bend.

Prayer

For Yarrow and all that is bitter.

For the days I rehearse your departure. For the Yes that is a lie/
And the Yes that is not a lie. For You./ For the rivers I will never see. For Yams.
For the way it resembles a woman./ For my mother. For the words/ That would not
Exist without it: For Yesterday. For not yet. For Youth. For Yogurt and the mornings/ You feed me./

For Yearning./ For what is Yours and not mine./ For the words I repeat in the dark/ And the Lord that is always listening.

From Life on Mars

The Weather in Space

Is God being or pure force? The wind
Or what commands it? When our lives slow
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls

In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing
After all we're certain to lose, so alive –
Faces radiant with panic.

The Soul

The voice is clean. Has heft. Like stones
Dropped in still water, or tossed
One after the other at a low wall.
Chipping away at what pushes back.
Not always making a dent, but keeping at it.
And the silence around it is a door
Pinched through with light. A garment
That attests to breasts, the privacy
Between the thighs. The body is what we
Lean toward,
Tensing as it darts, dancing away,
But it's the voice that enters us. Even
Saying nothing
Over and over absently to itself

Willed in Autumn

The room is red, like ourselves
On the inside. We enter
And my heart ticks out its tune
Of *soon, soon*. I kneel
On the bed and wait. The silence
Behind me is you, shallow breaths
That rustle nothing. This will last.
I grip the sheets, telling time

To get lost. I close my eyes
So the red is darker now, deep,
A willed distance that backs away
The faster we approach.

I dream a little plot of land and six
Kid goats. Every night it rains.
Every morning sun breaks through
And the earth is firm again under our feet.

I am writing this so it will stay true.
Go for a while into your life,
But meet me come dusk
At a bar where music sweeps outs

From a jukebox choked with ragged bills.
We'll wander back barefoot at night,
Carrying our shoes to save them
From the rain. We'll laugh

To remember all the things
That slaughtered us a lifetime ago,
And at the silly goats, greedy for anything
Soft enough to crack between their teeth.

My God It's Full of Stars is too long to include here, but it is also the most extraordinary poem in the book (*Life on Mars*), and you can listen to the David Bowie song, too, that inspired it – Here's the link:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55519/my-god-its-full-of-stars>.

From Duende Poems

History

This is a poem about the itch
That stirs a nation at night.

This is a poem about all we'll do
Not to scratch –

Where fatigue is great, the mind
Will invent entire stories to protect sleep.

Dark stories. Deep fright.
Syntax of nonsense.

Our prone shape has slept a long time.
Our night, many nights.

This is a story in the poem's own voice.
This is epic.

Ash

Strange house we must keep and fill,
House that eats and pleads and kills,
House on legs. House on fire. House
infested
With desire. Haunted house.
Lonely house.
House of trick and such and shrug.
Give-it-to-me house. *I need you-baby*
house,
House whose rooms are pooled
with blood.
House with hands. House of guilt.
House
That other houses built. House
of lies
And pride and bone. House afraid
to be alone.
House like an engine that churns
And stalls.
House with skin and hair for walls.
House the seasons singe and douse.
House that believes it is not a house.

From the moment I saw it, sitting toward the bottom of a page in our reader, I couldn't "help but memorize a poem whose meter had worked upon me quickly and in a way I couldn't yet understand. Its rhyme scheme cemented, for me, a new sense of inevitability, allowing the lines to slip easily into my hear and stay there: I'm Nobody! Who are you? . . .



See you next week, I hope – Stay WELL! E. H.