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POET TO POET: LAUREATE TRACY K. SMITH AND “AWE”

“Oh my. If Emily appeared in my class, I would be in awe, in awe of her quiet authority, her fearless willingness to imagine things like eternity and the life of the soul. If she were my student, I would step back and enjoy her.” On the phone from her Princeton office, where, as director of the creative writing program, Tracy K. Smith, America’s newest Poet Laureate, answers a wildly suppositional question.

She had, of course, already answered it many times in her three volumes of poetry and a National Book Award Finalist memoir, *Ordinary Light*, in which she describes her first meeting with Dickinson:

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 ear and stay there:

I’m Nobody! Who are you? . . .

Every now and then, when I was thinking about something altogether different, the first stanza of that poem, by Emily Dickinson, would pop into the front of my mind, drawing me into mischievous collusion with the speaker: *Then there’s a pair of us! / Don’t tell!* (*Ordinary Light* 145-46)

Decades later, having received the highest accolades possible for poets – the Pulitzer Prize, for example, for *Life on Mars*; three awards for *Duende* (the Whiting, the James Laughlin, and Essence Magazine’s Literary Award); the Academy Fellowship given by the Academy of American Poets; and more – she reflects on what she owes to and shares with a poet whose life was so different from hers. Connecting the “pair of us” are childhoods with pockets of time alone (Tracy was the youngest of five by a number of years) in a house brimming with books that fostered questions (“How many worlds were there, and what did they want from us, there, in our houses, under the low roofs of our lives?” wonders the five-year-old Tracy on Halloween [*Ordinary Light* 36]), questions in keeping with Dickinson’s persistent questions (“there is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world can never fill” and so forth [L10]; family ties to siblings (especially interesting: each had an older, influential brother) and cousins; appreciative but sometimes complex relationships with parents whose religious faith each poet questioned; both poets became closer to their mothers as they attended them to their deaths (mind meeting mind “by tunneling”).

Of course, their worlds were also entirely different. Although she was born in Falmouth, about 150 miles from Amherst, Tracy was raised in California suburbs, far from the southern roots of her parents but with stories of the Civil Rights struggles of southern relatives. She attended Harvard, home of Dickinson manuscripts, where she was more influenced by Seamus Heaney, Henri Cole, and Dickinson interpreters Lucie Brock-Broido and Helen Vendler. She also joined the Dark Room Collective of African American poets. That – and years at Columbia University,

where she earned her M.F.A. and at Stanford as a Stegner Fellow; two marriages (her husband, Raphael Allison, is a scholar of 20th Century poetry); three children; and now the high profile status of Poet Laureate – distinguish her from Dickinson, but the first poem in her first book is most certainly one that occupies Dickinsonian territory, that between sleeping and waking, life and death:

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.

The prose version of this reflection on the death of a loved parent is equally poetic and calls to mind Dickinson's reflections on her parental losses. She spoke of thoughts interrupting an "ordinary day":

And then the fact of her death – no, not simply the fact of her death but rather the facts of her death and her life; her presence in this world and the presence of her absence made the whole of what I remembered or lacked; everything she gave and left and what, in leaving, she took – the fact of all that, like a column of thread and promise and light, would flare bright and hot in my mind (*Ordinary Light* 329).

Both parents emerge in *Ordinary Light* as vivid, complex subjects, but it is *Life on Mars*, Smith's third volume and winner of the Pulitzer, that has been described as "Smith's wild, far-ranging elegy" (Dan Chiasson, "Other Worlds) for the father, whose engineering skills and vision and disciplined work life provided models for her own. From an Alabama town named Sunflower, Floyd William Smith (1935-2008), became an optical engineer on the Hubble telescope.

The title poem, "Life on Mars," literally central in the book, weaves passages about torture at Abu Ghraib, horrifying snippets of ugly (actual) news like the kidnapping/ rape of a child, and a bleak conversation between two women that call to mind women coming and going in Prufrock's world but bleaker, would not appear to parallel anything in Dickinson's sight, but listen to this passage toward the end of the nine-part poem:

The earth beneath us. The earth
Around and above. The earth
Pushing up against our houses,
Complicit with gravity. The earth
Ageless watching us rise and curl.
Our spades, our oxen, the jagged lines
We carve into dirt. The earth
Nicked and sliced into territory.

Hacked and hollowed. Stopped tight.
Tripwire. [...]
The earth floating in darkness, suspended in spin.
The earth gunning it around the sun.
The earth we plunder like thieves. . .
The earth coming off on our shoes.

Its spaces reflecting the sprawling universe, uncontrollable in this passage, evokes Dickinson's meditations on this earth that gobbles up the dead but also brings beauty and mystery; the entire book, in fact, though also a collage of contemporary culture (David Bowie songs are echoed in at least three poems), resonates with the skepticism blended with triumphant tones of Emily Dickinson, who marvels over "Arcturus," that brightest of stars in the north, wondering "if the 'poles' should frisk about/ And stand upon their heads!" (Fr117) and, elsewhere, about the Pleiades, Mercury, Saturn, and Orion. In fact, the major metaphor of telescope and sight or lack thereof, of whirling planets finally visible but still perplexing, the whirling imagery of it all links Smith's *Life on Mars*, with, among the many other voices it contains, Emily's.

"Life on Mars" spreads its existential imagery and dissociations over six pages, lines linked to others through slant rhyme ("forth"/ "surf"), assonance, consonance, repetition; the effect mirrors the central image. It is followed by a villanelle, "Solstice," that opens with a jolt the way Dickinson does in, say, "A toad can die of light": "They're gassing geese outside of JFK," begins Smith's intricate poem, which, she tells us, blends a meditation on euthanizing geese with news of the 2009 presidential election in Iran. That concatenation of imagery, imagery that veers between and blends the theological, the scientific, and hard news, though more specific in its political thrust, would not have surprised Dickinson who pictures her world collapsing like a tent and speakers falling from plank to plank as the Civil War and more thrust hegemonic ideas and practices into doubt.

The volume begins with a question: "Is God being or pure force? The wind/ Or what commands it?" Although many of the poems that follow in *Life on Mars* offer horrifying glimpses of the life on this earth. Its second poem, "Sci-Fi," which, she tells us was inspired by watching Truffaut's version of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, offers glimpses of what is and what might be. However, the alert reader might also pick up an *ars poetica*, one compatible with Dickinson's aesthetics and the "circumference" toward which she yearned:

There will be no edges, but curves.
Clean lines pointing only forward

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

. Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe.

That is followed by an astonishingly word-luscious poem in tercets, "My God, It's Full of Stars." In that poem there is an imagined heaven as a library, where "The books have lived here all along, belonging/ for weeks at a time to one or another in the brief sequences/ Of family names, speaking (at night mostly) to a face,/ A pair of eyes." Whatever else this might signify, the Dickinson reader might think of "I – Years had been – from/ Home –" (Fr440) in which "a Face/ I never saw before" might "Stare stolid into mine." Just so, the poem Smith prepared for the holographic handout at the Folger's Dickinson birthday observation in 2016, "Ash" (published in *The New Yorker* November 23, 2015), resonates with all those Dickinson poems on homes and houses and what sustains them or doesn't:

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. . .

Imagine Dickinson reading these poems, feeling the top of her head coming off, as she pondered the problems and savored the possibilities in her own Amherst, which was the site of both astronomical discoveries that were the cutting edge of her own time and, not necessarily opposite, the recurrence of God fervor. As Dickinson's spider sewing at night, Smith speaks wistfully on that phone conversation of the value of those rare times of privacy, when she has the "space to disappear into language," to see what it might "unfold for me." About the stunning metaphors that she (and Dickinson) discovers, she says "metaphor can pull you farther from the literal; the distortions that (figurative) language invokes can have the unusual effect of pulling us closer to the emotional truth of a situation," and she speaks of her "intense wonder," on a good day: when lines labored over also surprise her, she asks, "how could that come out of me?" Speaking too quickly for her listener to take down every word, she is at least as much in wonder at the process as at the product of her work. As she told Gregory Pardlo, "every poem, no matter its specific terms, is seeking to collapse the distance between seemingly disparate or incompatible things. I think that's what metaphor is doing; at its best, it's not working to reproduce a literal sense . . . it's striving for purposeful distortion. . . That sense of distortion is what gives us access to the true strangeness in our most powerful feelings."

Dickinson seems present in almost everything Tracy K. Smith says, whether publically in articles, talks, interviews or privately on the phone. On the highly contested (in Dickinson studies of the arrangement of "fascicles" or her own chapbooks, Smith says, "I feel like poems are always speaking to each other. Sometimes the conversation they seem to be carrying on among themselves is surprising. Arranging them into collections is a way of highlighting this sense of conversation. It also broadens our sense of what individual poems are saying on their own." As her own poetry attests, she reveres Dickinson's respect for language "her devotion and submission to what carefully and lovingly arranged language can render" as though the poet is

“listening to something not necessarily elected, straining toward a truth she did not know she knew.” Dickinson’s willingness to explore “the soul,” to direct her imagination toward that which is “silent, unsayable” is the courageous goal of Smith’s own poetry. In April, a month important to Dickinson as well (and, perhaps not incidentally, the month in 1990 in which the Hubble Telescope first began to envision the heretofore invisible), her fourth book of poetry, *Wade in the Water*, will appear. At its center is a Civil War suite based on the experience of black soldiers and their families during and after the war. Dickinsonians should scoop it up with enthusiasm and read it with Awe.

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