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# Poet in Motion

US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith '97SOA gives wings to words.

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In the fall of 1995, Tracy K. Smith ’97SOA sat in a classroom in Dodge Hall at Columbia University, listening to the poet Lucille Clifton talk about her late husband. Clifton, a visiting professor and one of America’s most beloved poets, often spoke

about the interplay of her personal life and her writing, but one story was of particular interest to Smith: after Clifton lost her husband, strange poems began coming to her, as if from outside her own mind — poems that were telling her about the future.

At the time, Smith, a young graduate student, was still mourning the loss of her mother, who had died the year before of cancer. Kathryn Smith had been a devout Christian, proper and gracious, the backbone of the family, and she and Tracy, the youngest of five children, had had an intense bond.

Now, at age fifty-nine, she was gone.

Yet here was Clifton, in class, intimating that her dead husband was not exactly dead. “I remember her saying that there is energy all around us, communicating with us — if only we could listen,” Smith says.

Smith has been listening ever since, her crystal-clear receptiveness and hunger for contact leading to four books of emotionally potent, revelatory poetry. She won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Life on Mars*, and her coming-of-age memoir *Ordinary Light* was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award. Last year, Smith attained one of poetry’s highest honors when the Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden, acting on the consensus of more than a hundred poetry authorities nationwide, named Smith the US Poet Laureate for 2017–18. This past March, Smith was appointed to a second term.

In her work, Smith hurls herself through the weather of human feeling: love and loss, desire and need, dread and awe. Whether contemplating the worm inside the mescal bottle (“Its last happy exhalations, / Lungs giddy, mouth spilling / A necklace of minuscule bubbles”) or deep-space images of dust funnels and stars (“We saw to the edge of all there is / So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back”), there is always some underlying ache for “those moments where you don’t have control, where you wish something could overtake you, which I think is a big part of what being alive is about,” she says. Lately her mind has been on the idea of compassion, and she is using her pulpit as poet laureate to bring the Word to places on the map often overlooked by the culturati: a church in South Carolina, an opioid treatment center in Kentucky. She wants people outside of cities and college towns to get the chance to talk about, as she says, “the big questions of feeling and experience that poetry puts us in mind of.”

Smith writes mostly in free verse (unrhymed, unmetered), with the occasional formal composition — a sonnet, a villanelle — stitched neatly into the fabric of her slender books. Each poem begins its life as “an anxiety, some sort of unrest, good or bad, something I’m unsettled by or worried about, something I don’t have a grasp on,” Smith says. “A poem allows me to wrestle with these ideas and inklings and get somewhere with them.” As she works, her ear gets busier, “listening to the sounds of words, and the images that emerge organically, and the ideas that those things give way to.

“I find poetry lifts us out of our conscious concerns and helps us think in different ways. You’re playing with form, you’re listening to strange associations, and something you didn’t know you knew comes out. That fascinates me. It’s one of the things that made me want to write poems: teaching myself something I didn’t think I knew.”



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Smith first encountered the power of language through nursery rhymes and the Bible, and from the locutions of her Alabama-born parents. She grew up in Fairfield, California, halfway between San Francisco and Sacramento, and one town away from Travis Air Force Base. It was the 1970s, when, as Smith writes, “everything shone bright as brass”: there were Saturday-morning cartoons, sprawling family breakfasts. Outside, a flowering yard hopped with finches that “scattered like buckshot” at human approach, and roads led to pastures where unsaddled horses came to your hand for apples.

Smith's father, Floyd William Smith, was a patriotic, sci-fi-loving Air Force avionics engineer who, after retiring from the military, worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. Her mother ran the household, went to church, sewed dresses and quilts, made a heavenly Alabama lemon-cheese layer cake, and later taught school.

But beneath the surface of family life and the Smiths' poised adherence to a code of excellence that was their answer to the assumptions of the white world around them, Smith, at age ten, lived with "a vague knowledge that pain was part of my birthright." There was this unspoken thing whose presence she felt in her Southern-raised parents — what Smith memorably calls "the pain we hate most because we know it has been borne by the people we love."

Floyd Smith found comfort in books, and whenever his daughter complained of boredom, he encouraged her to read. At the house, titles by Sir Walter Scott and Edgar Allan Poe shared shelf space with paperback mysteries, *National Geographic*, and *Yes I Can*, by Sammy Davis Jr. But the literature that made the biggest impression on young Smith came from school. She recalls being at home at age eleven, in the blue-velvet chair, book open, and reading the words:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody — too?

"I thought: *she's talking to me*," Smith says. "*Someone's talking to me*."

The poet, Emily Dickinson, made Smith feel understood. "I wanted to be able to think and communicate in that way," she says.

After her high-school and Bible-school years, Smith, who had always dreamed of moving east, went to Harvard, where she indulged her love of those other prophets, the poets. She fell hard for the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Rita Dove '98HON, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney (one of her professors), Yusef Komunyakaa, and William Matthews, and was drawn to the Spanish concept of *duende*, the mysterious, frenzied soul-force that seizes the artist and drives creativity.During Smith's senior year of college, her mother fell ill. After graduation, Smith moved back to California to be with Kathryn, who, as her condition worsened, never lost faith in her deliverance — or in Smith's. In *Ordinary Light*, Smith recounts being in a room with her mother, who, delirious from medications, emerges from her fog into a perfect lucidity, speaking with unseen companions. Smith is startled: it's as if her mother "can see through this world to the next, to the places where ghosts and angels sit

and walk and gesture unseen among us.” When Smith asks her who’s there, Kathryn says, clearly, “There are two angels sitting here, Tracy, and one of them just told me you’re going to become a writer.”

Weeks later, Smith, her siblings, and her father stood at Kathryn’s bedside, saying “I love you” and “Goodbye,” when they heard “a sound that seemed to carve a tunnel between our world and some other . . . an otherworldly breath, a vivid presence that blew past us without stopping.”

For Smith, the death of her mother was “a huge loss that changed everything,” she says. And so when she entered Columbia to study poetry, she had her subject.

Smith lives with her husband, literary scholar Raphael Allison, and their daughter and twin sons in a one-story house of wood beams and high windows on a pinecone-strewn street near Princeton University, where Smith directs the creative-writing program.

Inside, the house is open, light-filled. Crayola art covers the fridge. Books line the hall. In the living room, on a white sofa, Coco, a chocolate Labrador retriever, is hunched expectantly, a toy bone in her jaws. The muted trumpet of Miles Davis purrs from a small speaker. On a table sits an eye-grabbing artifact: a late-1950s green-gray typewriter that belonged to Kathryn Smith.

As Allison herds Coco out of the room, Smith looks back on her time at Columbia, “running around New York with my classmates, going to parties, meeting in cafés at night to workshop poems.” Her two years in the MFA program were both grounding and transformational. She remembers Clifton, who died in 2010, talking in class about the prophetic poems she wrote after her husband’s death, but Smith wouldn’t see them for another decade.

“Finally, in her last book, *Mercy* [2004], those poems appear, in a series called ‘the message from The Ones (received in the late 70s),’” Smith says. “I use those poems now to say to my students, ‘Write some poems that are not in your own voice, that are coming from a body of knowledge you don’t have, that are prophetic, that come from outside the human.’ For them it’s probably going to be an exercise, though for Clifton it was real. But I think we can teach ourselves to imagine differently by moving in these directions.”

Smith also studied with Lucie Brock-Broido ’82SOA, former director of Columbia’s MFA poetry program; Linda Gregg, later a colleague of Smith’s at Princeton; and poet and memoirist Mark Doty. Almost all the poems that Smith wrote in her two years at Columbia “were engaged with trying to resolve the fact that my mother was dead,” Smith says.

While *Ordinary Light* and *Life on Mars* reflected the loss of her parents (Floyd Smith died in 2008), Smith’s new work, *Wade in the Water*, winds its way through the idea of America itself.

At the heart of the collection lies a series of “found poems,” existing documents that Smith has rendered into lines and stanzas. These historical texts include letters from Black soldiers of the Civil War and their loved ones.

A letter from Bel Air, Maryland, in August 1864 reads,

> Mr. president  It is my Desire to be free
> to go to see my people
> on the eastern shore  my mistress
> wont let me  you will please
> let me know if we are free  and what i
> can do

Smith has been thinking about America’s “anxiety about welcoming strangers, and not just strangers but people who are from here who we’re not willing to welcome,” she says. “I thought maybe these letters were where I needed to start. There was a kind of disregard in the attitude toward these Black citizens, who were not considered citizens fully at that point, yet who were serving the nation in war.

“I want to find out what our anxiety is about. Poems help me ask these questions of myself, guiding me toward a better clarity around questions of compassion.”

In *Wade in the Water*, Smith artfully interrogates racism, sexism, xenophobia, and environmental destruction (the poem “Watershed” blends the text of a *New York Times Magazine* exposé on chemical dumping with testimony of near-death experiences, to remarkable effect), but she does not read as a “political poet” in the doctrinaire sense. She’s a seeker, an asker of questions at a moment when empathy is often politicized. Smith plays with this idea in “Political Poem,” a title that “makes

you expect something dogmatic," Smith says. Instead, you get a dreamlike vision of two mowers in a field, a mile apart, and the poet imagining what would happen if they saw each other across that distance and waved — how their work would "carry them / into the better part of evening, each mowing / ahead and doubling back, then looking up to catch / sight of his echo, sought and held … "

And then there are angels: the pair of bikers, all leather jackets and corroded teeth, in "The Angels"; and the celestial associations of the title poem, "Wade in the Water," named for a spiritual sung along the Underground Railroad as a reminder to people escaping slavery to take to the water, to throw the dogs off the scent.

These elements link Smith's personal history to America's, and to the ever-rushing current that runs through all things, from the river to the stars.

"I think my work is motivated by a wish to connect to something outside of what we can see and understand," Smith says. "Something that might help us to deal with what we're confronted with — the real."

The position of poet laureate was established in 1985, a revision to the title of consultant in poetry, which dates to 1937. In total, forty-eight American poets, including Bishop and Dove, have served as America's official bard. Smith is the third Columbia graduate to hold the post, along with Daniel Hoffman '47CC, '56GSAS (1973–74) and Anthony Hecht '50GSAS (1982–84).

The poet laureate opens and closes the Library of Congress's annual literary series with a reading and a lecture, gives readings and interviews, and generally serves as a national consciousness-raiser for the art form. Shortly after Smith's appointment, Senator Tom Udall of New Mexico, a poetry lover, invited her to his state. Smith visited Cannon Air Force Base, and at night she gave a reading of her own poems and those of other poets. "Some people wanted to read some of the poems I had read, in their own voices," Smith says. "It was another way of sharing these texts — almost as offerings to each other."



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She also visited the Santa Fe Indian School, which the US government founded in 1890 with the goal of acculturation, and which gained autonomy in the 1920s. “It’s a beautiful place, where students are so mindful of their own culture and language, of the ways language is vital to identity, and of the threats that put language at peril. There was a sense of the living word, sacred and religious, which relates to poetry in many ways.”

On a trip to South Carolina, Smith went to rural sites: a church, a school involved in the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court cases. Congressman Jim Clyburn joined Smith and framed his introduction around Black history, “which was perfect, because so much of the poetry in my readings is drawn from history, or from

thinking about the connection between current events and the history of civil rights and the Civil War," Smith says. "I met a lot of people who were happy and proud. A woman told me, 'I brought my daughter here because I wanted her to see that someone who looks like her can do what you're doing.' There was a motivation that had to do with selfhood and offering role models for a new generation of Black kids. It was a really special trip."

If being a poet is to ask questions, being poet laureate is also to field them. People at Smith's readings usually want to know where poems come from and how they're made, while the press makes its perennial demand that poetry justify itself. "Why bother being a poet?" a reporter from *PBS NewsHour* asked Smith, naming runaway technology and political strife as possible disincentives. "What kind of impact could you possibly have amidst all that?" On *CBS This Morning*, an anchorwoman noted to Smith that many people find poetry "difficult" and "boring."

But Smith says poetry is necessary in twenty-first-century life, "because it rewards us for naming things in their complexity. It creates a vocabulary for our difficult-to-name feelings; it brings us in touch with the quiet voice of the inner life, which most facets of consumer culture are drowning out. I think poetry is one way of saying, 'None of that's important. There's something quiet that *I* house that's worth contemplating.'"

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