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Tracy K. Smith: 'Staying Human: Poetry in the Age of Technology'

by Tracy K. Smith

During her first year as poet laureate of the United States, Tracy K. Smith launched a program of readings and discussions in rural communities in New Mexico, South Carolina and Kentucky. Her goal was not to instruct but simply to share her love of poetry and to listen to how others experience it. In April, to mark the beginning of her second term as poet laureate, Smith delivered a lecture at the Library of Congress about what she experienced during that tour and how poetry can defend us from the distractions and degradations of our technological culture. Her remarks are presented here in full with permission from the author and the Library of Congress.

Poetry is not the language we live in. It's not the language of our day-to-day errand-running and obligation-fulfilling, not the language with which we are asked to justify ourselves to the outside world. It certainly isn't the language to which commercial value has been assigned. But poetry — which awakens our senses, frees us from the tyranny of literal meaning and assures us of the credible reality of emotional truth — puts us in touch with something bigger than language, something I believe each of us was perhaps fluent in before the moment when language became our chief vehicle for meaning.

Before I go any further, let me say that this lecture, like the poetry I write, is the product of a particular imagination — one as informed by belief in a vast and mysterious and yet orderly and purposeful universe as by a deep curiosity about the voices, faces and lives of strangers. Furthermore, I am operating on the notion that poetry can save me from disappearing into the narrow version of myself I may be tempted to resort to when I feel lazy or defeated, or when my greedy ego takes over. I'm operating on the belief that poetry can restore me to the large original self I haven't yet learned to fully recognize.

Poets have different names for that self. Stanley Kunitz called it "a pool of energy that has nothing to do with personal identity, but that falls away from self, blends into the natural universe." Emerson believed it lived in the same place the inner voice does, and that it had access to the large whole of which each of us are all but small parts, what he called the Over-soul: "the wise silence; the universal beauty." Elizabeth Bishop's view of such oneness, at least in her famous poem, "In the Waiting Room," is less consoling:

Suddenly, from inside,

came an oh! of pain

— Aunt Consuelo's voice —

not very loud or long.

I wasn't at all surprised;

even then I knew she was

a foolish, timid woman.

I might have been embarrassed,

but wasn't. What took me

completely by surprise

was that it was me:

my voice, in my mouth.

Without thinking at all

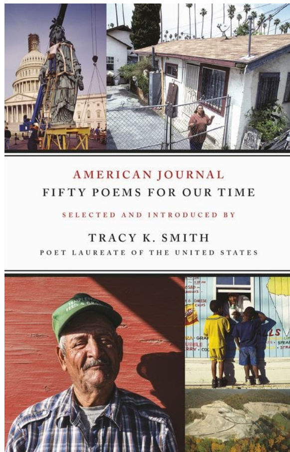
I was my foolish aunt,

I — we — were falling, falling

One of poetry's great effects, through its emphasis upon feeling, association, music and image — things we recognize and respond to even before we understand why — is to guide us toward the part of ourselves so deeply buried that it borders upon the collective.

Now, I feel strongly about poetry for what it offers in these terms, but I also, more and more, recognize its value as a remedy to the various things that have bombarded our lines of sight and our thought space, and that tamper with our ability or even our desire to listen to that deeply rooted part of ourselves. I'm talking about the many products, services, networks, trends, apps, tools, toys, as well as the drugs and devices for remedying their effects that are pitched to us nonstop: in our browser sidebars, in the pages of print media, embedded in movies and TV shows, on airplanes, in taxis and trains and even toilet stalls. I guess, more and more, I see the technology we live listening for and peering into as the primary and most effective vehicle of that sales pitch. So much so that I now wonder which came first, the device or whatever the device is urging us to click on and pay for. The glib, facile, simplistic and prefabricated language by which we as consumers are constantly surrounded is a language that flatters us, that urges us to indulge ourselves, to get away from it all, to be unique by opting in, talking back, liking us on Facebook, leaving a review, sharing, retweeting, etc. It's a sell so smooth that its terms have infiltrated the language of other facets of daily life: that of education (*rate your professor; did she make the material relatable and easily digestible or did you have to work to learn something?; what are the job outcomes and earning potential of your intended major?*). Individual selfhood has taken on a different tenor; we "brand" ourselves (what an awful verb, aligned as it is with the practice of burning the owner's initials into flesh), we vie for "followers" on social media, we turn our experience into "content" that can be assimilated and "liked" quickly and reassuringly by others in our network. Friendship is different now, too; we have allowed conversation to be splintered and atomized by the devices we invite to interrupt and distract us. We aren't listening to what or whom we think we are. I'd go so far to say that much of the time, perhaps as an unconscious coping mechanism, we aren't listening at all. Not to other people and least of all to ourselves. We can't afford to.

What does this have to do with poetry? Well, as a writer, I'm convinced that one of the only defenses against the degradations of our market-driven culture is to cleave to language that fosters humility, awareness of complexity, commitment to the lives of others and a resistance to the overly easy and the patently false. Poetry is one vehicle for this humanizing, reanimating version of language, because the features of a poem insist upon a different value system. Rather than numbing or drowning out the difficult-to-describe but urgently sensed feelings that are part of being human, poetry invites us to tease them out, to draw them into language that is rooted in intricate thought and strange impulse. Rather than putting up a buffer between ourselves and those outside our immediate sphere, poems devise means to contemplate those others and to take in their perspectives. Rather than solving, sidestepping or denying problems, poems bear witness to dark facets of experience, they give us vocabulary for the terror, the shame, the regret — as well as the terms of hope — resulting from the choices we make and those we consent to. In other words, poems say, "Hey, come here, let me tell you what it was like." And they ask us to submit to another experience of reality. They disorient us from our home base, and they teach us to admit and submit to the feeling of vulnerability, to act upon empathy and curiosity, and to follow along allowing sense to accrue at its own pace and upon its own terms. If you do that enough times with a poem, you might begin to think differently about actual strangers, you might also begin to recognize that there are new possibilities of feeling and awareness available to you — ones that take you far beyond those pitched to you by the marketing teams of the corporations whose products are at the moment enjoying a good run.



In case I haven't said it clearly, the language circulating upon the surface of the 21st century is in the business of pulling us away from the interior, the reflective, the singular, the impractical and the unsummarizable. In such a current, the language of poetry is a radically rehumanizing force, because it is one of the only generally accessible languages that rewards us for naming things in their realness and their complexity. And despite what social media would have us believe, it is not the language of sharing and following, or buying and wearing, but rather that of bearing deep and unabashed witness to the urgencies and upheavals of lived experience, that comes closest to bringing us into visceral proximity with the lives and plights of others. That's not just distraction, and it's not a luxury. It's a means of self-preservation, a way of affirming commitment to the belief that our lives can and should matter to one another and to ourselves.

This might be a good time for a poem. Let's listen to Laura Kasischke read her poem, "Heart/mind":

A bear batting at a beehive, how

clumsy the mind

always was with the heart. Wanting

what it wanted.

The blizzard's

accountant, how

timidly the heart approached the business

of the mind. Counting

what it counted.

Light inside a cage, the way the heart —

Bird trapped in an airport, the way the mind —

How it flashed on the floor of the phone booth, my

last dime. And

this letter

I didn't send

how surprising

to find it now.

All this love I must have felt.

I think any successful poem teaches you how to read it, and this poem provides a good road map to that process, beginning with the title "Heart/mind." What is the slash meant to signal? As a participant in a conversation at the Men's Addiction Rehab Center in Kentucky pointed out, perhaps it is heart over mind, an emotional reversal of the common notion of mind over matter. Right away, the poem invites you to question and theorize, and then it begins to tell you what it thinks of itself.

Those early stanzas, with their metaphors that unfold into concrete (if surprising) visceral examples over the span of a few lines, also set up a pattern that becomes useful to the reader once the poem becomes more spare and gestural:

A bear batting at a beehive, how

clumsy the mind

always was with the heart. Wanting

what it wanted.

The blizzard's

accountant, how

timidly the heart approached the business

of the mind. Counting

what it counted.

I get a strong visceral sense of those first strange scenes the poem sketches out. “A bear batting at a beehive.” Not only do we have the alliteration of bear, beehive, batting, but we are presented with an image of this big animal angrily and hungrily swatting at something. There’s danger on both sides of that equation: threat and counterthreat. So the poem begins with this strange sense of fraught balance. Then, moving on, “how / clumsy,” comes in to characterize the bear. So perhaps what we are witnessing is not so much a vicious threat, as, simply, ham-fisted. When we take in the entire statement: “how / clumsy the mind / always was with the heart,” suddenly, the heart becomes the hive. There’s something in there that is hungrily sought but also worth protecting. Those first four lines of the poem guide you into a sense of all of the potential registers of emotion that are making this metaphor happen.

The next set of images does the same thing, beginning with “The blizzard’s / accountant.” Now, I don’t have a way of picturing that. I’m already on alert from having had so many senses activated by the first metaphor, but I’ve got to let this next stanza show me what to see. “How timidly” — okay, maybe that’s the accountant in the stanza — “how / timidly the heart approaches the business/of the mind.” And, what kind of math would suffice in the face of a blizzard’s worth of snow? And yet, the heart persists, “Counting / what it counted.”

By the time we reach the lines, “Light inside a cage, the way the heart — // Bird trapped in an airport, the way the mind — ” we can instinctively see what they gesture toward. They are shorthand for a process we can now complete on our own.

Yet even having taught us how to work with what we have come to expect, the poem still manages to surprise us. I love this. I think every poem, every fully realized poem, finds a way to surprise its reader. Moreover, as a poet, I understand that a poem is only finished, only fully realized, if it succeeds in alerting me to something I couldn’t have been capable of seeing at the outset, something I couldn’t have known to say were it not for all of the things that the process of writing the poem has led me to say. Kasischke’s poem moves through images of the heart as an indomitable beacon, something uncageable. And the image of the mind as trapped, bumping up against invisible barriers, forever barred from where it seeks to go. And she leaps from there to the sense of frustration and desperation in that image of the last dime on the mucky, disgusting phone booth floor. (Speaking of technology! Let me concede that there are some things that have definitely been improved upon . . .) All of the visceral feelings that the poem draws upon, from its very opening, work to invest its arrival with a palpably felt urgency. I don’t believe it was a plan, something outlined and plotted from the start, but rather that moving through the register of those different distinct feelings created the momentum that pulled Kasischke to the poem’s closure, which, incidentally, resists metaphor. Perhaps by now the poem is free from the need for corollaries, invested as it is in the confluence of newly activated feelings:

this letter

I didn’t send

how surprising

to find it now.

All this love I must have felt.

And how does this poem speak to my concerns about market-driven language? Well, I think about it this way: We don’t read poems only for the rhetorical stance they take, or for the arguments they may actively or subtly make about their conscious material; we also — and, I’d argue, mostly — read them for how they direct our attention in ways that are antithetical to mere utility. In “Heart/mind,” Laura Kasischke is not making editorial-like claims against the language of the marketplace, of commodity — but, in urging us to think and respond as it does, the poem persuasively unsettles the unthinking or automatic ways we often experience content, language and narrative. It is in this manner that this and other poems invite our dissatisfaction with the view of the world as a place made up mostly of resources to exhaust or consume.

Here is another poem. “Music from Childhood,” by John Yau:

You grow up hearing two languages. Neither fits your fits

Your mother informs you “moon” means “window to another world.”

You begin to hear words mourn the sounds buried inside their mouths

A row of yellow windows and a painting of them

Your mother informs you “moon” means “window to another world.”

You decide it is better to step back and sit in the shadows

A row of yellow windows and a painting of them

Someone said you can see a blue pagoda or a red rocket ship

You decide it is better to step back and sit in the shadows

Is it because you saw a black asteroid fly past your window

Someone said you can see a blue pagoda or a red rocket ship

I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water

Is it because I saw a black asteroid fly past my window

The air hums — a circus performer riding a bicycle towards the ceiling

I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water

The town has started sinking back into its commercial

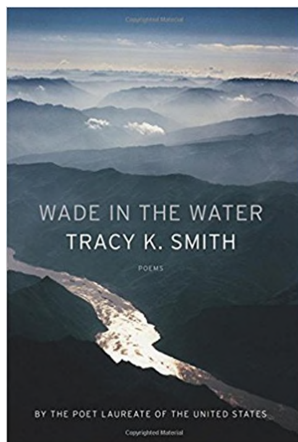
The air hums — a circus performer riding a bicycle towards the ceiling

You grow up hearing two languages. Neither fits your fits

The town has started sinking back into its commercial

You begin to hear words mourn the sounds buried inside their mouths

This poem behaves quite differently from Kasischke's. Firstly, it's a pantoum, which means the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third lines of the following stanza. Because the repetition only occurs once, it's not a pattern that you can readily anticipate. To my ear, the form creates an eerie sense of deja vu, the feeling of having known something without quite understanding how, which I think supports some of the other behavior in this poem. There are fragments, shifting pronouns. The you being addressed early in the poem suggests that the speaker is talking to himself; later, the you seems to become a specific person: "I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water." There are unexplained visual images in the poem. There's a specific sense of place. But none of it feels fully anchored; I couldn't confidently say these are the terms of the speaker's life. What I do feel confident of is what seems to accrue emotionally through the poem, this sense of searching, of turning back to recall something that's only partially clear. Many of the poem's line breaks foster sudden shifts of subject and context.



In the second stanza of the poem, I'm drawn to this beautiful line: "You begin to hear words mourn the sounds buried inside their mouths." I can't tell you exactly what that means, but *mourn*, *sounds*, *buried* and *mouths* create a sudden sense of sonic authority. I think of loss; I think of language and voices, which conjure people. But then the line break carries me from "buried inside their mouths" to "A row of yellow" — and maybe this is just me, but when "mouths" is followed by "a row of yellow," I anticipate a word like "teeth." Instead, we get "A row of yellow windows and a painting of them." So suddenly, the poem leads us from an almost dreamlike, mournful perspective to a gaze that has shifted to look out. This is a poem that's not going to guide its reader by the hand, but if you surrender to it, and the feeling of being a little bit lost part of the time, you get to feel many different things. I come away from this poem thinking about someone who may really have grown up in a household with more than one language. But I also feel the sense of interiority and privacy that's so active in this poem that I am convinced that any person anywhere is living in two languages: the language of the self and the language that comes from outside of the self.

I shared this poem at Cannon Air Force base in Clovis, N.M., with men and women enlisted in the Air Force, air base employees and military spouses. It's the kind of poem that requires you to let go of the wish for linear narrative and respond, instead, to the tone, to the accrual of images, to the almost haunting effects of hearing every line repeated once and no more. I asked what people noticed — that's the question I ask the students in my classrooms as well as the audience members who have attended readings I've given in rural communities in New Mexico, South Carolina and Kentucky over the last several months. And just

as with the Kasischke poem, which, in a room of men working to overcome addiction, activated very specific memories of struggling with similar questions of mind or reason versus feeling or urge, John Yau's poem reminded airmen of their time in the service, of seeking to follow in the footsteps of a parent and then finding themselves in their own lives, lost at times without a clear model or guide: "I tried to follow in your footsteps, but they turned to water." The poem with its sense of rootlessness, of struggle to make sense of disparate languages, also reminded people of displacement — the kind one feels in childhood or adolescence, as well as the kind one feels upon being deployed, or upon being uprooted again and again by assignments in different places. One audience member spoke about the occasional feelings of social or racial isolation he sometimes feels in the service. Just as none of the recovering addicts felt the need to argue that Kasischke's poem is *about* addiction, nobody felt the need to say, Yau's is a poem about being in the armed forces — but in both cases the poems afforded listeners with new images, new metaphors and new vocabularies for living with the feelings indigenous to their lives, whoever they are.

That's one of the remarkable things poems do, one of the ways poems lead us first more deeply into ourselves, and then, more naturally toward the areas of common feeling we share with others. That's how poems teach us to recognize that there are forms of community that exist across or in spite of the obvious dividing lines we are taught to respect.

My rural outreach project, even in just three "pilot" trips, has awakened a belief in the real possibility that we might learn to become open to participation in real-time communities forged along varied and sometimes unlikely lines. And it's urged a powerful submission to feelings of humility, shared vulnerability, doubt and trust. It's been a privilege to share my own work and the work of other contemporary poets with strangers that crowdsourcing algorithms tell me I ought to have nothing in common with, and to hear people say things like, *I'm white, you're black; I'm from this place, you're from another, and yet, when you talk about your father you restore my own father to me.* This happens again and again, though the vocabulary for connection is different from person to person and poem to poem.

I think my interest in such a project is an extension of my own belief or wish that Americans of all backgrounds might have something quietly urgent and *humanizing* to offer to one another. But in order to get to it, we have to turn down the volume on all the many sources seeking to sell us on the notion of an unmendable divide — because that's what they're doing, they're selling us on a product, which is strife. In order to get to community, we have to go quiet, slow down, allow ourselves to be both vulnerable and brave, and approach one another with an idea as simple as, *I'm me, you're you, we are not the same, and yet perhaps we can feel safe here together talking about something as simple as a poem.*

Poems encourage the notion that your life must be as important to you as mine is to me. And they encourage the more difficult notion that *your* life must be as important to me as my own life is; that I can only truly honor and protect *myself* by honoring and protecting *you*. Now maybe that last bit is a distant dream, the purview of a few great poets and philosophers, but I hope it isn't. Either way, I believe that poetry helps bridge the gap between self-centeredness or tribalism and true compassion. Poems do this in myriad ways. One of them is by helping to inoculate us against the catchy, inescapable, strategically biased language of the market, firing away at us from every direction in its ceaseless ploy to be the only language.