

20190604_theslowdown_20190604_128

Wed, 9/30 7:21PM 5:00

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

dark, poem, photo, light, tubman, congress, slow, neck, houses, harriet tubman, shadows, bodice, rests, photograph, disappear, gingham, center, trees, dread, belongs

00:05

I'm Tracy k Smith, and this is the slow down.

00:22

There is a photograph of a young Harriet Tubman, jointly held by the Library of Congress, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a new photo, or rather newly discovered and believed to be the earliest photo of her in existence. There are numerous photos of Tubman as an older woman. Each time I see one, something comes alive in my chest. It's her gaze, which seems to give back the feeling of all she's seen. All she carried back and forth with her on journeys to carry folks out of slavery and in to freedom. In this early photo, taken in the 1860s, in Auburn, New York, Tubman is dark haired and smooth faced, there was only the hint of the lines that will later map her forehead. I wish I could show the image here. Instead, let me read the museum catalog description of the portrait. Why? Because it's an image that deserves our rapt attention, even in audio format. This photograph shows Harriet Tubman seated in an interior room turned to the left, one hand rests on the back of a wooden chair, another rests in her lap. A patterned carpet covers the floor, and the wall or drop behind her is a blank light color. Tubman wears a dark bodice that buttons at the center front and has dropped sleeves with heavy rushing and ruffled details on the sleeves. There's a panel of lighter fabric around the yoke with the upper neck the same dark color as the body of the bodice. A lace collar with short tails is crossed and pinned at the front of her neck. Her hair is parted at the center and gathered at the nape of her neck. tub men's full skirt is made from a light and dark pattern gingham check. The photo lived for a long time in an unknown album belonging to a Quaker abolitionist. Now, as Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden has remarked, it belongs to all of us. Today's poem, what kind of times are these by address and rich makes me think of the Quaker meeting houses where blacks were taught to read and write. It makes me think of the safe houses Tubman would pass through. Rich's

poem reminds us that the dangers necessitating such places are far from God. What kind of times are these by adlerian rich, there's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows up hill, and the old Revolutionary Road breaks off into shadows near a meeting house, abandoned by the persecuted who disappeared into those shadows. I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread. But don't be fooled. This isn't a Russian poem. This is not somewhere else. But here. Our country moving closer to its own truth and dread. its own ways of making people disappear. I won't tell you where the places the dark mesh of the woods, meaning the unmarked strip of light, Ghost ridden Crossroads leafmould paradise. I know already. Who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear. And I won't tell you where it is. So why do I tell you anything? Because you still listen? Because in times like these, to have you listen at all, it's necessary to talk about trees. The slow down is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation. To get a poem delivered to you daily. Go to slowdown.org and sign up for our newsletter. Follow the slow down on Instagram and Twitter at [slowdownshot](https://twitter.com/slowdownshot).