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00:06

I'm us Poet Laureate, Tracy K. Smith. And this is the slow down.

00:23

What advice would you give to your younger self? I asked myself this question from time to time. And I'm still not sure what the answer ought to be. Just a few years ago, rounding a corner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I passed frequently as an undergraduate at Harvard, a gust of winter wind laughed at my face. And I found myself revisited by a strange mix of happy sadness. It was as though the difficult times I once lived through their worries about a boyfriend whose indifference had punched a hole through my heart, or dread, about assignments that were piling up. It was as though all of that had been so meaningful in its time, that I longed for even just a piece of that worry to be mine again. Maybe what I actually longed for was a glimpse of my young self, a chance to claim her in her strength, as well as her shortcomings. And perhaps to tell her something like, Don't worry, you'll make it through this and a lot more. in its own way. Everything is going to be okay. Generic as it is, I think that's the only advice I'd be willing to offer a younger me. I certainly wouldn't divulge any shortcuts. Because if she had avoided the struggles of her first marriage, she might never have found her way to write the poems that helped save her from despair. And if she had sidestepped some of the mistakes, I'm not willing to go into here, she may never have learned that thinking only of herself, and her own wishes was a spiritual dead end. And if I told her how much work and worry it would be to have children, surely she'd have forgotten one of the greatest sources of meaning, and necessary humility in her adult life. Do you think it might be possible for me to remember this when my own daughter is 19 or 26? Or 33? I have the feeling. It's one thing to tell myself to go ahead and make all the necessary mistakes, but my little girl, well, I feel comfortable urging her to make choices like the ones that led me to where I am today. Oh, Lord, hopefully, I can get with that kind of hands off approach when the time

comes. Today's poem is to my 24 year old self, by New Jersey based poet Brenda Shaughnessy. It's one in a series of poems in which the poet offers advice to herself at different stages of life. This advice, part affirmation, part warning reminds me of the oracles of ancient times, the ones who spoke in riddles, making just enough sense that the humans who paid them notice, would recognize their own mistakes only after they'd already made them. To my 24 year old self, by Brenda Shaughnessy, you wouldn't know me. If I came to you in a dream. You'd be sleeping it off. You'd be naked and cute. But you think you're a kind of monster. And maybe you are just not an ugly one. That whole business will come later. You'd pass me on the street as well. A normal, someone who traded in her essentials, for a look of haunted responsibility. Someone who was maybe once a girl you'd know. I would want to tell you that romance was a kind of civilization that fell. I cannot explain the complex strategies in that bitter defeat. Not that I fathom it, except to say that we are all haunted you to in your wild love and fear. You are a monster. I am not a dream. Slow down is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation.