



# theslowdown\_20200610\_20200610\_128

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

race, identity, slept, days, selfhood, opened, whole damn city, racial identity, fill, parker, poem, markers, twinge, acknowledging, led, slowdown, garden, prevailing, gulf, dry lips

00:06

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

00:21

Last fall, I participated in a group exercise around the markers of social identity. When do you find yourself leaning into your identity as determined by markers like race, gender, disability, or sexuality? By which of these things have you been made vulnerable? In which mode of your social identity? Do you find the greatest sense of security? again, and again, my responses revealed that my racial identity was the one I cleave to. Race, for me, was a source of pride. race was also a reason for which I could recall being profiled or targeted through good times and bad race was a kind of home base. But when I was a child, things were different. Race felt like something I had no words to discuss. Talking about it in the safety of home was okay. But outside of that safe space, things were different. Acknowledging my race opened up a huge gulf of discomfort between me and the white kids I grew up going to school with, it was there playing to see impossible to deny. But more often than not acknowledging it opened up a can of worms. Nobody quite knew what to do with. I lived with a prevailing silence around such topics until sophomore year of college, when I took my first course in African American literature, and found my way into a glorious and difficult and enlightening conversation about race, nation, selfhood, and community, a conversation that continues to this day. I'm grateful that the world has changed in the intervening decades. Sometimes, my daughter's vocabulary for talking about her identity gives me a twinge of retroactive envy, but mostly it gives me hope, and relief, and joy. Today's poem is the book of Genesis by Morgan Parker. Parker's poems fill me with a similar joy for the ways they ponder and bear witness to the experience of blackness. The Book of Genesis by Morgan Parker once I was lone brown spot in a garden of upright stems, they said, What do you have to say? Let your dry lips open, let cocoa powder rain onto our desks. They stared at me for six days, as if I were a

peach pit. As if by lunchtime, I would be swallowed into the sandbox like a dream. They led me to a sink made me wash my hands in cold oil. I was a temple angels are watching over, they chanted until I never slept. My eyes turned purple with guilt, and imagination. They never let me eat the stale body or fill my ribs with bitter juice. They led me to an apple tree, I swear to God told me to sit and wait until my earrings got heavy. And I could see right through the whole damn city. These days, I think I can find truth in song as if it started inside me. These days, I think a powdered rock could save us cold soils of a stranger's tongue. And I sleep with my hands and little fists tucked close to my chin. This is the way my people have slept for years. Oh garden of soiled light, I believe in different reasons.

04:45

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