I'm us Poet Laureate Tracy k Smith. And this is the slowdown.

Last summer I traveled in the American South with a poet Rachel Eliza Griffiths and it brought us into contact with physical artifacts and lingering evidence of America's barbarous and unconscionable antebellum period. I feel the need to say this clearly, there is absolutely no way to justify or rationalize the fact of slavery. Buying, selling and enslaving human beings was a conscious decision that people made out of the desire to attain and maintain great wealth, abiding wealth, wealth that continues to circulate in the American economy. Slavery is one of the original crimes for which this nation has yet to adequately atone in Savannah, Georgia, Rachel Eliza and I visited Laurel Grove cemetery South with a friend whose family members are buried there. He didn't take us there to show us their grave sites, but to call our attention to a more than 200 year old oak tree that survives from the time when Laurel Grove was part of the Springfield rice plantation, standing under the tree and looking up, you see deep grooves in the bark, like hatch marks set at 45 degree angles. I couldn't see how something like leather could have cut so effectively into the wood. Those imprints gave my eyes the impression that they'd been made with something as tough as chain. Such Oaks, known as whipping trees, are places where enslaved blacks are punished with lashings and those deep grooves, some of which have withstood as many as two centuries were made by another person who stood wielding the whip. whipping tree by Rachel Eliza Griffiths. LAUREL Grove cemetery, South Savannah, Georgia 2018 where are the whips and hands that risked their own history to lash lessons of blood upon black bodies roped against these simple Oaks. The marks are too high to touch now, the evidence to grotesque to scab our wailing eyes. I am trying to translate a word that glows like a chain. It is nearly God. The thick trees have grown tall beyond their unbearable childhoods. In the tree. I see
which way the master snapped his wrist turned directions, changing his mind when the body
didn't scream loud enough. When the eyes of the slave refused to look away from the master she
wants nursed? Where there days, he tired from bringing the whip across his thin freedom. And did
he throw his ugly work to another man. As he walked tenderly to a house he dared to call his
home. The South stands in the throat of a tree. Truth is a scraped breath between glorious brown
limbs. How hard was it for them to gather their blistered family into gentle arms and keep singing
to Jesus? I want what flesh they hemmed. Every flap of skin crying and glowing red in faith. I can't
look away from these unbroken trees. I am aware that we are living in the middle ring of terrorism.
The trouble of scars bleeding through new maps. The tree trying alone to survive are dead names
and the stripped bark. The slow down is a production of American public media in partnership
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