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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

elephant, trunk, herd, observes, affirms, heightened emotion, watched, fallen, heaved, life, moved, moment, lift, ears, jean, poem, halfmoon, slowdown, giraffe, wept

00:06

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

00:19

My sister Jean has always loved giraffes and elephants. As a child, she had large stuffed animal versions of each. And she wept when the beloved giraffe was left behind. And one of the families moves once, maybe 10 years ago, Jeanne told me about an elephant documentary she'd watched. Her voice transmitted a sense of such rapture and empathy, that I believe I truly did come around to seeing the animals the way she does, as beautiful, gentle, and not just smart, but possessed of of remarkable emotional intelligence. She also told me about the strong familial bonds, elephants have ties affirmed by the manner in which elephants gather to mourn their dead. That conversation happened years ago. And before recording this episode, I wanted to make sure I was remembering everything correctly. So I watched a brief National Geographic video of a herd of elephants that had gathered around the body of a deceased matriarch. The corpse at the center of the group has been present for some time, and predators have already taken away much of the flesh. But in the video, I watch as each elephant approaches the body, seeming to caress the matriarch's ears, and her skull with their trunks. Then, the voice of the researcher points out the way that moisture is leaking from the glands behind the elephant's eyes. She says it is something that happens during moments of heightened emotion. She stopped short of calling it crying. But crying strikes me as an appropriate description of the response we are observing. Today's poem is the death of an elephant by Jean Franco Panucci. I'm grateful for the reverence with which the poet observes and describes this moment of loss and grief and for the quiet way. The poem affirms the immense dignity of all life. The death of an elephant by John Franco Panucci a transformation. She stood apart from the grazing herd, motionless, except for a slowed curl of her trunk. Her head lowered, her great ears flopped forward, like a closing umbrella

as the bull came to sniff. When she dropped to her haunches, the herd screaming and trumpeting thundered a fallen halfmoon around her. Her four legs collapsed, and she slumped to her belly. A day gone come tumbling down. Only the young ones were allowed to touch her now. One laid his trunk on her back. One nuzzled her ear, one strained at her great fallen rump, as if pushing toward life and learning of death. Then, the great bull had lowered, tried to lift her. With a roar. He moved to her head and tried to lift her. He tore a trunk full of dry grass, and stuffed it in her mouth over the dust on her sad lip to lift her. He tried to melt her into life. She heaved to her side, and was dead. It was sunset, late African spring and December, as a restless feeding heard, came one by one to the gray body and moved off together over the ridge into the dusk. The slowdown is a production of American public media in partnership with the Poetry Foundation.