

# 20190227\_theslowdown\_20190227\_128

Wed, 9/30 1:37PM 5:01

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

poem, women, prison, person, lives, accuse, ambiguities, poetry, showed, swift, sense, gift, pardon, room, glare, windham, sleep, existed, security, thoughtful

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

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In November, I visited a women's Correctional Facility in Windham, Maine. It was my first time in a prison of any kind, and I didn't know what to expect past security to residents showed us around their block. They told us when they ate, where they slept, what they did for recreation. They showed us their garden, where they grew produce for the kitchen. It was not like college, or camp, or a big house where an extended family might live. But there existed a sense of pride and investment in community. When it came time for our poetry session, we filed into a meeting room. morning light came in through large windows overlooking a nearby farm. Farther off, there were low hills spanning the distance. Listening to the women in this room, bring honest, thoughtful language to bear upon the feelings making up their lives. I thought to myself, we are so lucky in this moment right now. Then I corrected the thought, because it's hard to say there's anything lucky about being in prison. And because the we, I referred to was only temporary. Soon, I'd collect my things, my freedom, and walk back through security into the outside world. But for an hour and a half that morning, we were women together, human together, making space for one another stories of joy, and regret, and vulnerability. One participant shared her response to a poem I've always found to be a little mysterious. In it, she focused upon images that spoke to her sense of forced separation from the person she had known herself to be before prison. In the poems repetition, she recognized the feeling of doing time, and its minor variations. She caught glimpses of her own different relationships, to guards, to friends on the outside, to the other women serving time. Rather than trying to decode the poems ambiguities. She took them as signals of what in life,

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we may never get to the bottom of.

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Perhaps it's impossible to fully know another person. Certainly, it's impossible to meet someone once for 90 minutes, and know enough to say who they are, and why they're where they are. But I believe the small things that remind us of all we don't, or can't know about someone else, our kind of gift. Anything that makes us humble, in the face of another person's vast humanity is a gift. Today's poem is the lineup by the late Joan swift of Washington State.

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The lineup by Joan swift

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each prisoner is so sad in the glare. I want to be his mother. Tell him the white light will go down, and he will sleep soon. No need to turn under eyes to shuffle poor soldiers, boys in a play, to where numbers obey. They have hands as limp as wet leaves, the long fingers of their lives hanging. They cannot see past the sharp edge, nor hear me breathe. Oh, I would tell each one he will wake small again, in some utterly new place. Trees without bars, sun, a sweet juice, a green field full of pardon. The walls come in. I am captured like him, locked in this world forever. Unable to say Ron, be free. I love you having to accuse and accuse.

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