

# 20190426\_theslowdown\_20190426\_128

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

poem, war, minsky, 10th grade, lived, house, oft quoted, life, happily, myth, sense, other people's houses, polemics, sixth, stephens, slowdown, speaker, line, dispel, aggression

00:05

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

00:22

And Mrs. Stephens 10th grade English class, we read Erich Maria remarques novel All Quiet on the Western Front, which offers a vivid and troubling sense of the soldiers experience of World War One. It made war seem real, real and personal. But it did little to dispel my sense of war as a foreign thing, something fought elsewhere and in history. But war goes on in different ways everywhere. Though the United States hasn't witnessed full blown warfare on its own soil since Lincoln was president. Wars continue to be fought in our name. How much of our lives do we live unmindful of this fact? compared to many other parts of the world, American life is lived in relative comfort, and sometimes outright luxury. And yet, the upheaval affecting life in those other places is something in which our way of life is implicated. This is a dark conundrum acknowledged by today's poem, Ilya Kaminsky, we lived happily during the war. It brings to mind another text I encountered that same 10th grade year, Martin knee Miller's oft quoted poem about the Nazis rise to power, which begins with the lines. First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a socialist. You might remember how that poem ends with the familiar and poignant line, then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me. When the forms of aggression exist elsewhere, or when the degree of oppression is subtle, it's easy to convince yourself that things are fine, that they haven't gotten bad just yet, that we'll know when things are getting truly bad. And that when that time comes, of course, will act. But come Minsky's poem troubles, this rationalization, bad enough things are happening right now to real people. And our failure to do anything or to do enough ought to be a source of shame. But what interests me about the tone of Minsky's poem is its prevailing quiet. For one thing, the poem is set in past tense, as if none of the things I've just described as ongoing, are still in effect. Here, the speaker is

looking back at an earlier time of an unnamed war. And so the poem feels like a fable or myth. At one point, the speaker becomes very precise about the time period in question. He names the sixth month of a disastrous rain in the house of money. These terms refuse to line up with anything I can put my finger on with certainty. In this manner, the poem resists polemics, verging instead on prophecy or myth. This is aliah command skis. We lived happily during the war. And when they bombed other people's houses, we protested, but not enough. We opposed them, but not enough. I was in my bed. Around my bed, America was falling, invisible house by invisible house by invisible house. I took a chair outside and watched the sun in the sixth month, of a disastrous rain in the house of money in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money, our great country of money, we forgive us, lived happily during the war. The slowdown is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation.