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00:05

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



00:22

I'm a poet who has science envy. I wish I could truly understand what theoretical physics is all about. I wish I could gather a clear and logical mental picture of the notion that everything in existence is made of tiny strings of energy vibrating in not three, or even four. But as many as 11 dimensions. I wish I could hear those words, strings of energy, vibrating in 11 dimensions, and attach them to something measurable something with the potential of being grasped and proved. But I was never very good at math and learning my multiplication tables cost me no small degree of anxiety back in grade school, and calculus is a blur of pain, and shame. In order to make sense of what I'll never fully understand, I try to carry these irresistible scientific concepts to the realm of metaphor. I'm like a scavenger dragging a scrap of some other animals prey back to my den. When I think of 11 dimensions of infinite connections, linking every form of life across all of space and time, I imagined that we are like portable radio receivers, we're being transmitted to constantly even without our knowing it by every other thing alive in space, I imagine that the trees are calling to us, the birds, even perhaps the clouds, not to mention those immaterial beings we can't quite perceive. And I imagine that our thoughts and feelings and actions are sending out signals to, though we have little way of knowing what or whom they're reaching. In a poem, metaphors helped to bring distant and complex ideas up close, so they can be handled better by the mind. I imagine an elegant scientific equation must do something similar lassoing the far away and abstract, so the scientific mind can follow it a while, until, like a wild horse. It breaks free again. It reminds me of the

great poet Lucille Clifton, who used to write brief, philosophical poems about life, love and the forces of the universe. While her young children napped. She wrestled with the immensity of mankind's largest questions for 45 minutes or an hour each afternoon, then went back to taking care of her kids. And one of her famous later poems, the message from the ones is written as if in the voice of beings from another realm, beings come to earth to awaken mankind. These beings scold us for imagining them as ghosts dragging chains across the earth. I believe Lucille Clifton, who died in 2010, must now understand such things firsthand. In her lifetime, she was a beacon of conscience and understanding. I hear the beautiful echo of Clifton's voice in today's poem by Detroit native Crystal Williams, who now makes her home in Maine. It's called What the Memory Said, and it conjures a living, speaking sense of the imperceptible and who knows, perhaps in some theory of the universe, memories really are allocated their own unique dimension. Perhaps they go about their business in sync with us. Recognizing with perfect clarity, what you and I have long since forgotten what the memories said by Crystal Williams, you woman bearing your losses, the dog's leash taught in your hand. How can you so blind and quickly pass us on your morning walks? Haven't you yet learned? There are happenings on planes you do not see. The dog knows we are here and has crucial news when he stops and presses his muzzle to the air. Can't you see him sniffing at our feet and



05:10

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