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

What do you think robots sound like? What do you think their thoughts are like, are robots docile and subservient to humans? Or wildly intelligent, eager for the experience of freedom? Maybe you are like me, and your sense of robots moves back and forth, as if a fixed to a pendulum. Sometimes they're good or useful, like the robots that assist in laparoscopic surgeries, or the tireless production line robots that assemble cars. Other times well, don't they seem a little creepy? Like the voice answering all those questions from inside your phone? What if she's merely biding her time sizing you up and analyzing your proclivities and shortcomings? Doesn't it ever make you nervous? I think a really terrifying plotline would be this. An organic life form obsessed with artificial intelligence manages to unwittingly turn itself into machines. I find it frightening because it seems plausible. And it seems plausible. Because of the ways our own inventions have tampered with our brains, pleasure sensors, and attention span and materially changed our manner of interacting with our fellow human beings. I've lost my temper on occasion. With my credit card companies automated phone bots, most infuriating is their attempt at simulating casual banter. And I've more than once grown so weary speaking to actual humans, that I've wished I could be transferred to a digitized series of prompts. Do we sound like robots or do robots sound like us? I asked. Because today's poem, how we programmed the apocalypse by Zoe Hitzig seems to present compelling evidence in support of both possibilities. Maybe it's not important to choose sides, only to know that the gray area between us and them is growing. How we programmed the apocalypse by Zoe Hitzig. Remember the sonic attack, kind of like that, simulate the sounds of crickets. Then decimate the crickets. Sounds of a lover who can see in 16 colors. Sound of unread here to four heard only by the dead. Soon the people hear our sound,
each one's her own private Symphony. In a long queue, they gradually accrue. From a distance they seem to stretch continuous, smoothly defined as a smile line. But up close, one sees discontinuities up raised fists, cupping palms, trading sundries, shouldering past sisters and Sundays. Casting around for ways to afford the sound, neighbor came to mean she who queued in my vicinity. As the queue shortened, everyone could afford it. Then everyone was plural, data. Everything served and being served on metal servers. It was never our intent to punctuate the sentences of others. But now it's late, too late to understate our importance. And besides the crickets died for this pulses Quicken slipping across our screens. We play the quieting machines, we pity the soon unseen. A thought arrives, ask forgiveness instead. No, everyone we pity dies, the rest rust in line.

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