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00:05

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

00:22

Sometimes readers ask for specific answers about certain aspects of my poems. Is the speaker in your poem happy or worried? My answer is often something like this. When a poem alerts you to a fork in the road, it's not asking you to choose sides, but to gather a sense of what lies in both places. Today's poem, American sonnet for my past and future assassin by Terrence Hayes, reads like a grievance letter or litany of complaints, a list of the addresses many unbearable contradictions. I can't live with you anymore. The poem seems to be announcing you say one thing and meet another. This new version of you doesn't jive with the EU I once knew. But the poems many specific points of contention remain private, unnamed. You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it. The speaker says more than once. You don't seem to get it. But you got it. What then, is the crucial it? Instead of attempting to narrow down that it that runs through Hayes's poem? I'll tell you what useful possibilities such ambiguity opens up for me. Let's start with the title, American sonnet for my past and future assassin. The American sonnet part of the title tells me that nationhood that Americanness is essential to the experience of this poem. What does it mean then, to contemplate the poems grievances? Not in an intimate private context, but in the broad public sphere of national politics, and citizenship? And what about the word assassin in the part of the title, my past and future assassin? It makes sense that someone could have a past assassin, if that person is, say, speaking from the grave. Similarly, I can grasp how someone might fear the threat of future assassination. But how can anyone both fear death and speak from that very same state? That only makes sense to me? If I imagine the Speaker of the poem as a collective self, a we comprised of many individual eyes, some alive and fearful, some dead and still aggrieved? Who

are the generations of people in this country for whom such things might be true? I can think of several I belong to one myself. And yet, this country is my home. There's no other home, I seek to claim. Maybe this poems, objections aren't the prelude to a breakup at all, but rather, a way of laying everything on the line and saying, this relationship isn't working. It's time for something to change. Americans on it for my past and future assassin by Terrence ace. You don't seem to want it, but you wanted it. You don't seem to want it. But you won't admit it. You don't seem to want admittance. You don't seem to want admission. You don't seem to want it. But you haunt it. You don't seem to haunted but you haunted. You don't seem to get it. But you got it. You don't seem to care. But you care. You don't seem to buy it. But you sell it. You don't seem to want it. But you wanted it. You don't seem to pray. But you pray. You don't seem to pray. But you full of prayers. You don't seem to want it. But you wanted it. You don't seem too haunted, but you haunted. The slow down is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation.