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

Memory is a kingdom. Most of us merely wander the periphery on occasion, catching familiar sights and faces. All the old smells greet us in turn, and our perfume, a favorite childhood meal. Only dreaming, do we enter the gates lose ourselves to whole complicated chapters of memory. But only briefly. Or maybe memory is a river whose swiftcurrent races off toward a raging ocean. Wild white waves stories high. Like the ones I was foolish enough to try and ride once on a beach in Mexico. The lifeguard when he reached me, was perfectly livid, having just that morning seen someone pulled out and under. Some of us do get pulled out and under by the waves of memory lost there among the echoes and the shadows of things. While our loved ones look on from a distance dementia. Because I fear it. I've witnessed it in my own family. I wonder if it could ever bring any consolation at all. Look, there's an old friend waving to me. And oh, my grandmother's there with her gray dog. I used to be so frightened of that little barking thing. I won't be long. I'll catch up. Don't wait for me. Today's poem gives voice to the struggle of watching a parent disappear into such a state. Holy by Nancy Krakowskie. How many days can a woman's body go uncleaned? On the seventh? I cheated her to the bathroom? No. Me bargaining one Catholic mass for one shower. It's hard to say what frightened me more. Taking off her clothes and the room I'd warmed. Who are you? Where are my pants? Water slapping the tub or the sight of her hands hiding withered breaths. You can't go to church if you're not clean. I told the mother who bullied me into a VW on hungover Sundays, demanding a church bulletin to prove I'd gone. I'd spent the sermon furrowed in a Pew counting holes in the priest's words, mocking his pulsing tone. Planning a killer debate. Please let me go. We'd been a family of never think before you speak of feel and yell. I won't tell how loud her voice got. Let me go. rasp of a scared assailant. When I was
young, I wanted to be touched into believing. Feel the cool hand of a spirit. Maybe God himself on my cheek. A jeweled window. Sending a Blue Beam could be it. witnessing a votive flickering out could be it. consecration seemed possible. I felt an opening in my heart. And wasn't that where God was supposed to live. I wanted also to feel sorry for my sins. The empty shower ran its water cold. All those Sundays holding a hymnal my mother’s saying and a voice that switched keys, and now naked. She wailed long breath sobs worse than an infant’s because she knew too much. The awful inside her head, the sacred she sought. I moved to cradle the coiled shoulders of the woman I could almost forget I'd come from who in her pain. I could love and a bless it and wordless way. She leaned into my waiting arms, then pummeled me with skilled fists. She knew how to hit. I leaned on her fury, which felt fair and holy. Slow down is the production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Poetry Foundation.