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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

slow, mother, feelings, felt, tracy, poem, screwball comedies, quenched, angriest, strange, typical, boots, chen, lived, occasions, hospital, terminal illness, empty spaces, buy, pigeons



00:05

I'm us Poet Laureate Tracy k Smith.



00:09

And this is the slow down.



00:23

When my own mother was hospitalized with a terminal illness, I lived in a strange collision of feelings. I hadn't yet accepted her death as inevitable, but I knew it was possible. And that knowledge made me afraid. I was also afraid of disappointing her, and of being responsible for keeping my own life on track. At a time when the stakes seemed so much higher or stranger than ever before. We mostly sat watching old black and white movies together, screwball comedies, laughing at the characters mishaps, and sighing and relief when the obstacles to their happiness were finally overcome. I reserved my angriest feelings for my father, who, despite having done nothing wrong, became the target of the outrage. I felt toward fate itself. You're killing her. I screamed at him once. Though he wasn't. He was simply trying like the rest of us to make his own peace with what he couldn't change or control. After our mom died, my sister and I started shopping a lot. We buy clothes for occasions that didn't and might never exist. occasions that required us to show up looking pretty in new skirts or commanding in sturdy boots. We were prepared for anything. Walking from register to car with our bags, we felt quenched. But a week later, we'd be back in some fitting room smiling at our reflections thinking. Now we have everything now we are whole, though of course we didn't. We weren't. We lived in a feeling

of unresolvable imbalance, where what we needed was so vast, so ungraspable, so utterly beyond our reach, that all we could do was cram our empty spaces with new dresses, and boots, and any other little thing we could find. I want to share this work by first generation Chinese American poet Chen Chen, because it taps into one of the more difficult aspects of family life. It asks questions about the roles we play in relation to the people we love and need most, and how those roles can sometimes feel inadequate and inescapable. This poem has taught me something all these many years later about the nature of my own grief.



03:01

In the hospital.



03:04

My mother was in the hospital and everyone wanted to be my friend. But I was busy making a list. Good dog. Bad citizen. Short skeleton, tall mocha. Typical Tuesday. My mother was in the hospital and no one wanted to be her friend. Everyone wanted to be solved. queueing sympathies, very reasonable pigeons. No one had the time. And our solution to it was to buy shiny or watches. We were enamored with what our wrists could declare. My mother was in the hospital. And I didn't want to be her friend. Typical son. Tall latte, short tale, bad plot. Great with the a typical cafe. My mother was in the hospital, and she didn't want to be her friend. She wanted to be the family grocery list, low fat yogurt, firm tofu. She didn't trust my father to be it. You always forget something she said. Even when I do the list for you. Even then. The slow down is a production of American public media in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation. To get a poem delivered to you daily. Go to slowdownshow.org and sign up for our newsletter. And follow the slow down on Instagram and Twitter at [slowdownshow](https://www.instagram.com/slowdownshow). The slow down is written by me Tracy k Smith. It is produced by Jennifer Lai and Tracy Mumford. Our music is by Alexis quadrado. Engineering by Daniel Kearns and Corey shrapnel