

TRACY K. SMITH'S POETRY OF DESIRE

Smith is a storyteller who loves to explore how the body can respond to a lover, to family, and to history.

By Hilton Als



In her poems, Smith is a storyteller who loves to explore how the body can respond to a lover, to family, to history.

Photograph by Micaiah Carter for The New Yorker

“I only got one body,” a black woman says, deadly earnest, on a recent episode of “Random Acts of Flyness,” the HBO series about race. She pauses before adding, “And I got plans for it.” It can be startling to hear a woman of color describe and claim her own body: despite advances in our culture, some eyes still roll when a black woman says “I” or puts herself forward; in this political climate, it can be perceived as an aggressive act or as hysteria or—the worst—as special pleading. This has been an on-again, off-again problem in American letters since the nineteen-seventies, when authors ranging from Toni Morrison to Lucille Clifton, Gayle Jones, and Ntozake Shange began to write from inside black women’s lives, from a landscape that was dominated not by visible or invisible men but by black female characters, living intricately and boldly in their times, in their minds, and in their bodies, and pursuing joyful and complicated sexual lives. This was no small achievement, as the poet and activist Audre Lorde argued in her 1978 essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.”

Forty years later, it is still a bold move for black women to take on the erotic in writing. Consider, for instance, these lines from Robin Coste Lewis’s incredible poem “Plantation,” in her 2015 collection, “Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems,” addressed to another woman of color: “Then your tongue / was inside my mouth, and I wanted to say // *Please ask me first*, but it was your / tongue, so who cared suddenly // about your poor manners?” For Lewis and others, including Tracy K. Smith, the current United States Poet Laureate, writing about desire is a way of being heard in a world where it’s still necessary to say, as the woman on “Random Acts of Flyness” had to, “I only got one body. And I got plans for it.”

In Smith’s four books of verse—her latest, “Wade in the Water” (Graywolf), came out in April, and was recently followed by an anthology, “American Journal: Fifty Poems for Our Time” (co-published by Graywolf and the Library of Congress)—love and sexuality take many forms. The poem “Serenade,” in Smith’s witty and authoritative first book, “The Body’s Question” (2003), opens with a scene of happy erotic abduction:

I am dancing with Luis,
The dancing *puto*,

Delirious with Spanish and
moonlight,
With the scrawl of streets that led
us here
To night in a foreign language.
We are dancing the *merengue*
And my body rings
With the ringing that wants to be
answered.
As though I am a little drunk in
the bones.

In the next stanza, Smith zooms out to show us the place that holds her lust, like a delectable treat, in its hand. She's in a "City of Restless Vendors, of Steep Embankments," where her foreignness is no doubt part of what makes her feel so free. Soon, though, she shifts her focus back to Luis. Dancing with him makes manifest the question of the body—its capacity to feel joy, its capacity to give joy:

Luis takes my hand in his hand
And draws circles in the air
Above my head. I am spinning.
Sloppily at first, until my mind
Begins to understand that grace
Is a different phenomenon here,
And lets go of my two legs,
Allowing them to dance on their
own

"Serenade" evokes a passage in Ntozake Shange's 1975 "choreopoem," "For colored girls who have considered suicide / When the rainbow is enuf," where a "lady in blue" describes sweaty nights full of desire, dancing the "mambo, bomba, merengue" to Willie Colón:

so off i made it to this 36 hour
marathon dance
con salsa con ricardo
"sugggggggggggar" ray on southern

blvd . . .
wit my colored new jersey self
didn't know what anybody waz
saying
cept if dancin waz proof of origin
 i was jibarita herself that
nite
& the next day
i kept smilin & right on steppin
if he cd lead i waz ready to dance

Smith has some of Shange's theatrical force, though she is quieter in her effects; they both shimmer, but Smith has less flash. Her tone, conversational but never arch, invites us in. She's a storyteller who loves to explore how the body can respond to a lover, to family, to history. In her second book, "Duende" (2007), the Smith who danced freely within the sphere of place and history is undone by the real and metaphysical responsibilities of the erotic life she has chosen. From "One Man at a Time":

I take a man in my arms
And my eyes roll back,
Like a doll that needs
To be sat up. The world

Is dangerous. Look
What we do to one another,
As if nothing but having
Will sustain us. Not

The having, but the taking.
I want, I want. You,
Then me. The struggle
To give everything away.

Those times it's not love
That resides there, is it,
But a lunatic colt,
Hoof to plank all night

Till the door gapes wide.
As though something
Deep in us must be tapped
Rooted out.

Reading Smith, one is suddenly aware of “man” not only as a gender but as a weight—a solid force that risks ending the poem for a moment. But the moment passes as Smith, no longer the girl carried off by Luis, does the taking. But what is it that she has taken? What needs to be rooted out? That all-consuming, lunatic desire that ages us even as it drives us wild?

In “Duende” and in her third book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Life on Mars” (2011), Smith explores another aspect of her “I”—Tracy before she was Tracy. In “Interrogative,” she writes of her pregnant mother: “What did your hand mean to smooth / Across the casket of your belly? / What echoed there, if not me—tiny body / Afloat, akimbo, awake, or at rest?” To imagine who you were before you were is a way of understanding who you are now and what you may become. Smith is interested in the roots of love, the various selves that go into the making of a body. But “Duende” isn’t all wish and wonder. It’s also about threats to the female body, pleasures that can be withdrawn, judged. In her extraordinary poem “The Searchers,” she writes about a character in John Ford’s 1956 film of the same title—a white girl who was kidnapped and brought up by Native Americans. Saved, in a manner of speaking, by John Wayne, the child is returned to the white world she has never known:

He wants to kill her for surviving,
For the language she spits,
The way she runs, clutching
Her skirt as if life pools there.

Instead he grabs her, puts her
On his saddle, rides back
Into town where faces
She barely remembers

Smile into her fear
With questions and the wish,

The impossible wish, to forget.
What does living do to any of us?

Again and again, the questions arise: What does it mean for a man to take a girl or a woman? And what can it do to a man's idea of a woman if she is free and takes him? Is a relationship a kind of abduction or a form of rescue? Are men agents of freedom or of oppression? Are relationships a metaphor for life or life itself?

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Part of the gorgeous struggle in Smith's poetry is about how to understand and accept her twin selves: the black girl who was brought up to be a polite Christian and the woman who is willing to give herself over to unbridled sensation and desire, even with guys of other races.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Street Life

Born in 1972, Smith was the youngest of five siblings. Her parents, Floyd and Kathryn, an engineer and a schoolteacher, respectively, were Alabama natives who came up, politically speaking, during the civil-rights era. Smith was born in Massachusetts, but the family soon moved to Fairfield, California, where Floyd was stationed at a military base. Smith was a relatively privileged child; some of her siblings were already away at college when she was learning to read and write, so she had her parents more or less to herself. Words were a bond between the couple and their child. In her remarkable memoir, “*Ordinary Light*” (2015), Smith describes the bookshelves that her father had built in the hallway leading to her parents’ bedroom. There she found “the books my father would forever push me to read: ‘*Kidnapped*,’ ‘*Gulliver’s Travels*,’ ‘*Ivanhoe*,’ and the ones I eventually came to discover on my own. . . . There were some of [my mother’s] books on the shelves, I’m sure of it, books on child-rearing and theology, but the majority of what sat there spoke to my father’s sense of the world—or the world as he’d like us to know it: a vast and varied place full of mystery and order.”

For Kathryn Smith, mystery and order were ecclesiastical; the world began and ended with His word. It wasn’t that she was fierce in her belief so much as that she was calmly, resolutely resigned to the power of faith. Floyd was happily resigned to the power of

science and earthly life. (At one point, he set up an incubator in the house, so that Tracy could see how birds were hatched.)

If there is a central underlying tension in “Ordinary Light,” it’s the division between Smith’s reflective, mother-identified self—the one who, at age three, told her mother that she wanted to open her heart to the Lord—and the energy that goes into actively living one’s life, as exemplified by her father. Should Smith be independent, like a boy, or was it her portion, as a girl, to wait for Jesus to take the wheel? Were girls like her meant to be the upholders of community—Christian community—while boys were free to be individual thinkers? And where was Jesus when, for instance, a girl Tracy knew asked her if she wished she were white? Smith writes:

I don’t think we ever truly forgot
about whites, even when we were
alone among ourselves in the thick
of family. I doubt any blacks do.
There’s always a place in the mind
that feels different, distinct; not
worse off or envious but simply
aware of an extra thing that living
in a world that loathes and fears us
has necessitated we develop.
Perhaps that thing is the
counterbalance to the history of
loss I often tried to block out with
silence: a riotous upswing that,
quickly, painlessly, allows the mind
to unravel from all the knowing
and wondering it has been taught
to do; a simple tickle of
recognition capable of catching us
up in a feeling—no matter how
very fleeting—of historical joy.

The Smith of “Ordinary Light” is our Emerson, the Emerson of “Self-Reliance,” say, especially when she is examining a woman’s habit of making do in order to make something great. Emerson noted, “In every work of genius we recognize our own

rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” In Smith’s world, *possibility* is the key. Unlike some black writers, she doesn’t address the double rejection of blackness—by society and by the fractured family—not just because she didn’t experience the latter but because she’s more interested in black excellence and achievement that aren’t tainted by class aspirations, all that upwardly mobile Jack and Jill society jazz. The Smith kids made it because of who they were, not who they knew. Their parents taught them, by example, to be aspirational. Love and self-love, especially for blacks, are not a given but aspirational, too.

At Harvard, where Smith studied English, she began to write in earnest, inspired by what she heard in her head, of course, but also by the work of several poets she would consider essential to her growth. Emily Dickinson’s outrageous freedom when it came to drawing on Biblical cadences and forming her own colloquialisms may have been Smith’s greatest influence. She also fell in love with a boy, with whom she experienced physical pleasure. When Smith went home the following summer, at her mother’s church she heard a woman praying out loud for her and her boyfriend. In a passage of agonizing beauty, she notes how far she felt she’d travelled from the religion that had infused her girlhood:

Left behind by the homily and
miles away from the other
churchgoers, whose minds, at least
from where I sat, appeared to be
actively trailing the minister’s
words, hearing them and chuckling
or murmuring, or merely nodding
to themselves as the meaning sunk
in, I realized I had no idea what
the story was that I was part of. I
didn’t yet know what was
important to me or what would
remain important years down the
line, after the thrill of experiencing
these first freedoms, and the
weight of living with what they
brought, had passed.

After Smith's mother died, of cancer, in 1994—characteristically, she felt that her disease was part of God's grace, His plan for her—her father began seeing another woman, and Smith confronted him about it. How dare death and time erode the world her parents made for her? Had she herself left it behind when she decided to inhabit her own mind and body? Had she left her parents behind? If so, the abandonment was momentary, just as death is. (It's grief that's long.) In the end, Smith embodied her father's science through precision and observation, and her mother's faith by surviving with grace. In "The Speed of Belief," from "Life on Mars," she tells the story of love, her parents' love, as something that outlasts death—at least in a child's imagination. After her father died, she writes:

Probably he spun out of himself
And landed squarely in that there,
his new
Body capable, lean, vibrating at the
speed
Of belief. She was probably
waiting
In the light everyone describes,
Gesturing for him to come. . . .
They told us not to go
Tipping tables looking for them.
Not even
To visit their bodies in the ground.
They are
Sometimes maybe what calls out
To people stuck in some
impossible hell.
The ones who later recall, "I heard
a voice
Saying *Go* and finally, as if by
magic, I was able
Simply to go."

And where does Smith go—where does her body take her—as love and eroticism are folded up into marriage and children? Does the body forget itself, its needs, its happiness in unfamiliar landscapes, as it becomes more and more rooted in domestic

affairs? Smith gives us a possible answer in “Wade in the Water,” in her poem “The Everlasting Self” (for which the title serves as the first line):

Comes in from a downpour
Shaking water in every direction—
A collaborative condition:
Gathered, shed, spread, then
Forgotten, reabsorbed. Like love
From a lifetime ago, and mud
A dog has tracked across the floor.

The point, she’s saying, is to last, to make love a habit, a collaboration that regenerates itself by doing, by staying together beyond the highs and lows of new passions or old regrets. “Wade in the Water” is suffused with sadness and with the weight of history, the old racism that makes fresh wounds in black bodies—black female bodies—day after day after day. But, in the book’s title poem, Smith describes watching a performance of the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters—who keep alive a voice-and-movement ritual first performed by African slaves—and being changed by it, as one is changed by love, if one stays open to it. She may no longer be dancing with Luis in a foreign country, but her body still recognizes and can be taken over by the power of other bodies making art, of other voices telling their stories, and hers, because they know who they are—as blacks, as women, as humans in their single and collective body:

One of the women greeted me.
I love you, she said. She didn’t
Know me, but I believed her,
And a terrible new ache
Rolled over in my chest,
Like in a room where the drapes
Have been swept back. I love you,
I love you, as she continued
Down the hall past other
strangers,
Each feeling pierced suddenly
By pillars of heavy light.
I love you, throughout

The performance, in every
Handclap, every stomp. ♦

An earlier version of this piece misspelled the name of the publisher Graywolf.

This article appears in the print edition of the October 1, 2018, issue, with the headline “The Muses.”



Hilton Als, The New Yorker's theatre critic, has been a staff writer since 1994. He is the author of “White Girls.” [Read more »](#)

Video
