

## A Necessary Language: Tracy K. Smith's *Such Color*

Tracy K. Smith. *Such Color*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021. Pp. 256. \$26.00. Hardcover.

Tracy K. Smith's *Such Color: New and Selected Poems* (2021) is a major work, a testament to poetry's credibility as a form for speculative thought and inquiry. Her poems follow a consistent pattern of inductive thinking. They begin in the known world with an observation, thought, or position. Then they move into speculation. The ordinary process of waking up, in a poem titled "Song," provides as much a spur for writing a poem as the devastating loss of a parent or the reportage of child abduction and murder. "Song" expands within a moment of waking, one person looking at another: "I think of your hands all those years ago / Learning to maneuver a pencil, or struggling / To fasten a coat." Smith moves through a catalogue of all those fingers might do: raise to answer a question, lie empty at night, pick a nose or an ear, rest on a wheel or knee. But then these observations lead to an unusual question: "I am trying to decide what they feel like when they wake up / and discover my body is near. Before touch. / Pushing off the ledge of the easy quiet dancing between us" (134). What does nearness feel like to fingers? That strange question, which emerges without fanfare from the catalogue that precedes it, refuses the choice between absence or touch. The implication is that the known world contains the materials for seeing beyond what is certain: "After the blaze of knowing / That seeing" (210).

Grief, in Smith's hands, is an emotion that exposes the poet to other ways of seeing. *Such Color* contains moving, multi-part elegies for both of Smith's parents: "Joy," from *The Body's Question* (2003) and "The Speed of Belief," from *Life on Mars* (2011). The elegy, at least in certain strains of English-writing poetry, questions its own efficacy as a means toward accomplishing the mourning process. Milton puts it this way in "Lycidas": "Alas! what boots it with incessant care / To tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade, / And

strictly meditate the thankless Muse?” Smith questions the very premise of the elegy in “It’s Not,” a poem written about her father’s death and dedicated to her sister Jean: “So why do we insist / He has vanished, that death ran off with our / Everything worth having?” She runs back over her father’s daily life, with its taxes, dinners, gas prices, groceries, and televangelists. What had these parental duties excluded? What dimensions of life had they obstructed or forestalled? Why should she not “insist” instead

that he was  
Swimming only through this life—his slow,  
Graceful crawl, shoulders rippling,  
  
Legs slicing away at the waves, gliding  
Further into what life itself denies?  
He is only gone so far as we can tell. Though  
When I try, I see the white cloud of his hair  
In the distance like an eternity. (118)

Life here is continuous with death, in the sense that her father “swims” through one right into the other. As he disappears in death, he may be only “gone as far as we can tell.” The ordinary phrase “as far as we can tell” takes on a literal distance. And the final valedictory image of a cloud on the horizon becomes hair, which then—since distance has already acquired both temporal and physical meaning in the poem—is an “eternity.” The painful compression of these final lines, with their swift modulations in trope and in tone, seems brought into being by the breakthrough of the previous question. Why not insist, the poem asks, and, simply by insisting, transform what is?

“It’s Not” is a poem that, like “Song,” charges headlong into strangeness by first lingering with the everyday. *Such Color* renews the possibilities for poetry as a means of discovery while acknowledging the world as already made. Some of these pre-existing conditions are poetic: poems pay tribute to earlier poems by John Ashbery (“Some Trees”), Gwendolyn Brooks (“Riot”), Federico Garcia Lorca (“Duende”), and Linda Gregg (“Logos”). While the original Ashbery poem ends by imagining the trees as a chorus of smiles on a winter morning, Smith grounds her trees in historical reality: “A man was lynched yesterday / is what some trees / seem to say” (205). That poem offers an example of what Smith describes, in her memoir *Ordinary Light* (2015), as one of the impulses for her writing: an “encounter” with something “already alive somewhere” for which her job was “merely to listen.” She draws out, as though listening within Ashbery’s 1949 love poem, the ongoing violence (“yesterday”) the trees express.

Other poems explore more conceptual or procedural ways of writing in which the craft of composition and the attitude of listening come together in different ways. “Declaration,” for example, erases parts of the Declaration of Independence, while “I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It” transcribes the letters of Black Civil War soldiers and their relatives. By situating these sentences in her poetic lines, Smith searches for forms of representation that prove adequate, ethically, to the violence of history. In her notes to the latter poem, Smith writes that “once I began reading these texts, it became clear to me that the voices in question should command all the spaces within the poem” (216). Smith’s poems may refuse the pressure for certainty or statement, but these particular poems make it clear how “merely to listen” can stake out a political stance.

*Such Color* searches within the known world for something that may only emerge through the poem’s creation. “Is there,” she asks, “another dialect of the soul, a way it speaks in those who don’t possess the vocabulary of belief?” (308). Wallace Stevens had once been more peremptory, more absolute in his proposition that “after one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.” But Smith’s preferred mood is the interrogative. Her poems start off with the familiar details of things, a process that leads them to come up with a new question. In the muddle of the “whorl”—Smith’s name for the messiness of the quotidian—the poems have faith in their work, which feels like a necessity even as it partakes of the miraculous. The recognition of what poetry does is tied to wonder and strangeness, not because a poem emerges out of nowhere, but precisely because a poem makes use of all our familiar thoughts, feelings, words, and actions: “Wasn’t it strange that a poem, written in my vocabulary and as a result of my own thoughts or observations, could, when it was finished, manage to show me something I hadn’t already known?” Smith asks in *Ordinary Light*. That’s a different kind of belief than the confidence in a position or a doctrine. It’s a second-order certainty, grounded above all in the attention to craft and the receptivity to a source other than the individual. The power of Smith’s poetry lies in the force of mind that trusts the ordinari-ness of our beginnings to bring a radical unknowability into words.