

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *The Good Life*

When some people talk about money  
They speak as if it were a mysterious lover  
Who went out to buy milk and never  
Came back, and it makes me nostalgic  
For the years I lived on coffee and bread,  
Hungry all the time, walking to work on payday  
Like a woman journeying for water  
From a village without a well, then living  
One or two nights like everyone else  
On roast chicken and red wine.

Tracy K. Smith<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

When the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York City launched its Poetry in Motion series, the mission was straightforward: to offer a moment of timelessness in an otherwise busy and chaotic day for millions of subway riders and rail commuters. An excerpt from Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" was the first to be displayed, in 1992, and by its 10th anniversary, Poetry in Motion had exhibited more than 200 poems or excerpts by writers from around the world, from centuries-old to contemporary. And when the program was retired in 2008, it had circulated more than 2,000 poems for its 8.7 million riders nonstop across the MTA's 5000-square-mile travel region.

The MTA has since created what is now the Arts & Design program which selects and installs permanent artworks in subway and commuter rail stations, striving to create meaningful connections among sites, neighborhoods, and people and all in response to a larger rehabilitation of the transportation system at large. Tracy K. Smith's poem "The Good Life" appeared in 2013, paired with work by New York artist Amy Bennett. Of the program, Smith (a long time NYC commuter) writes, "I know that the poems I see on those trains do something to lift me out of the drudgery of the everyday, to elevate my sense of myself, to remind me that I'm not just a consumer (which is what all the ads in that same space are attempting to convince me that I am)." She continues: "I get emails almost every month from someone who doesn't consider him or herself a reader of poetry, but who has been reminded of something real and powerful by my brief poem, 'The Good Life.' Poems activate and affirm our sense of being individuals, of having feelings, of having been affected powerfully by the events and people that touch us."

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<sup>1</sup> "The Good Life" by Tracy K. Smith from *Life on Mars*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

The poem is clear, vivid, specific. But it isn't without questions. The biggest, perhaps: so what *is* the good life? How do we get it, or in this case, get it *back*? Nostalgia is a slippery muse. The speaker longs for an earlier—and hungrier—time, when she was “like a woman journeying.” This is complicated in the way memory almost always is, as we work through that tension between what *was* and what *is*, between then and now. One possible (and oversimplified, I'm sure) conclusion might be that our “hunger,” once satisfied, is more romantic in hindsight, the journey more inspiring once we've arrived at our destination.

But I think Smith is up to something more nuanced, something larger, something less answerable; just when we think we've arrived, we realize the road continues, the landscape changed and is changing still. Anyone who has lived—or is living—on coffee and bread, waiting for payday, and imagining “everyone else” (down to their roast chickens and red wines), has considered a life that is otherwise; it's a primal instinct to want more, even if we have it all—or at least to want different, want otherwise.

A first notion of what constitutes “the good life” likely has to do with luxury, satisfaction, pleasure, but as a title to this poem it's almost a riddle. I realize that one challenge I'm invited to think about is how the good life might be less than good if it is without hunger—that is, without desire, without longing, without anticipation, without journey, without (I dare say it) suffering. It's a peculiar, even ironic, vantage point for this speaker—a poem of nostalgia about a life of less from presumably a better station. But better *how*? She is no longer hungry except for that hunger, no longer “journeying for water from a village without a well” but journeying instead to get back to that village.

And so we have made a circle around the very question with which we began: which life is the good life? The life then, desiring more, or the life now, desiring less? The life of longing *with* hunger? Or the life of longing without it? Excellent fodder for a subway ride! What better company than this, an attempt, as Smith explains, “to wrestle into words that which is large and which seems to defy language itself...poetry's fundamental conundrum.”

### ✧ About the Poet

**Tracy K. Smith** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and currently serves as the 22nd United States Poet Laureate. The author of four poetry collections, including the just-published *Wade in the Water*, Smith is a professor at Princeton University where she also directs the creative writing program. After earning her BA from Harvard University and her MFA in creative writing from Columbia University, she held a Stegner fellowship at Stanford University.



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