

Samantha Thornhill

samanthaspeaks.com

Signs

Always stuck with me, the scene from that alien film: disturbing like finding
a shoe in the woods—
when the preacher gets the phone call about his wife. He drives out there,
the area she jogs
after work on evenings, indecisive road cutting through trees. When he finally
arrives, the night
is a conundrum of police officers: some young, some old, with cheeks dripping
off their faces.
As the preacher's car door coughs shut, one of the rookies is already walking
towards him holding
a fistful of bad news. After informing him his wife won't be alive much longer,
the cop exhales
I'm sorry— cheap information for the grieving. So the preacher follows the cop
to his wife, pinned
between a truck and a tree. Still sweaty from her jog, she smiles as he approaches.
They talk the way
lovers forget how to, as if the only two people alive in this whirlwind of lights.
His forehead wrinkles
like linen. He asks her if she feels any pain and she says no, her elbows kissing
the edge of the truck's
hood like bad table manners. She must know she is going to die soon, because
she now brings up
the children, starting from youngest to oldest; a mother, she must close the door
on her family rest-assured
that her girl drinks her milk, that the boy knows his math. The preacher asks any,
one, asks God if
there's anything they can do, knowing that the instant they move that truck, her
body will fall
to pieces, with his faith. The alien that shows up later in the movie is irrelevant.
Now everywhere
I go I see the people I love in the faces of strangers, clinging to this story of this
preacher and his wife
the way her body clung to that truck. At that moment I understood the paradox
of the human struggle;
sometimes, the same thing that slowly kills us is exactly the thing keeping us alive.



Trinidadian born Samantha Thornhill teaches poetry & performance at the Juilliard School in New York City and creative writing seminars at the Bronx Academy of Letters. *Little Odetta*, her poem turned picture book is being published in 2010 by Scholastic Books.

photo by Peter Dressel

INTROSPECTIVE: The writing process of *Signs*

One day I was walking through the woods of Charlottesville. There I found a lone shoe, a womanly shoe, and my skin caught goosebumps. I turned right around and hurried home half parts fright and inspiration.

My body's response to the shoe reminded me of when I first saw a scene in the movie *Signs* starring Mel Gibson, which too had given me goosebumps. The scene had haunted me since then and it was time to find out why. Besides, I had always wanted to write an ekphrastic poem about something besides a painting or sculpture.

When I began the process for writing "Signs" I instinctively found myself patterning it after Kim Addonizio's "Virgin Spring" selected by Rita Dove—my professor

at the time—for Best American Poetry 2000. Not only was Addonizio's poem about a disturbing movie, but her use of alternating short and long lines gave the poem a feeling a both dysfunction and balance.

"Signs" latched on to its form immediately, and slipped out of me in a way no poem has before or since—so wondrously. It seemed "Signs" was fully written inside me and was just waiting for me to catch up—the shoe a hinge. It took 30 minutes to get it down and the revisionist in me went on vacation for once.

For this and many other reasons, "Signs" is one of my absolute favorite poems, and I have performed it in almost every environment. I am honored to have it published in O&S.