

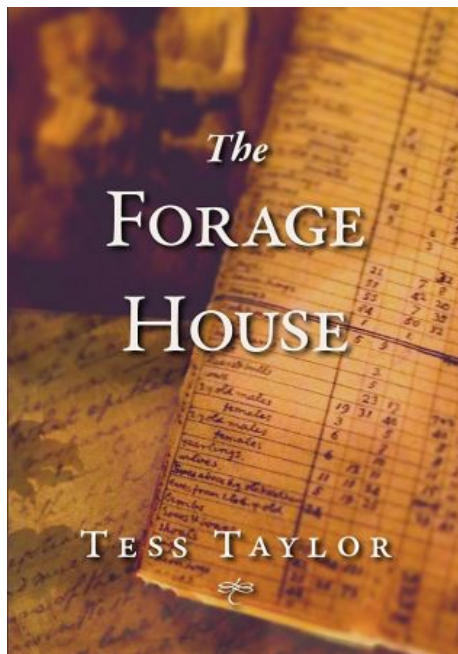
School of the Night and American Studies present

A Reading by Poet & Critic

Tess Taylor

Thursday, October 10, 5:30 pm
Mandel Reading Room

TESS TAYLOR's work has appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Yorker* and on NPR's All Things Considered. She is the author of the chapbook, *The Misremembered World* and was the 2010-2011 Amy Clampitt Resident in Lenox, MA.
www.tess-taylor.com



THE FORAGE HOUSE explores California-born Taylor's connection to her ancestor, founding father Thomas Jefferson. Partly written in residence at Monticello and meticulously researched, *The Forage House* explores how we make stories and how histories—even painful ones—make us.

Publisher's Weekly calls *The Forage House* "one of this season's four most exciting poetry titles."

Taylor says the book began "when DNA tests confirmed that chromosomal patterns on the descendants of Sally Hemings matched the patterns on the chromosomes of descendants of Thomas Jefferson. It was a fierce wake-up call... [to] my own connection to slavery. I felt the enormity of my ignorance."

Students of literature, history, and culture will learn from Taylor's creative exploration of American history. Join us for an afternoon that breaks down the divides between study, self, and art; between personal and political; between then and now, us and them.

A short excerpt from some of Tess Taylor's writings follow.

from “Remembering the Randolphs,” by Tess Taylor, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Summer 2013

<http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2013/summer/taylor-randolphs/>

I first encountered William Randolph in 1987.

I was in the fifth grade, preparing a presentation on where our families were from for my class in the El Cerrito, California, public schools. Each presentation had to be a few minutes long—we could bring pictures if we wanted.

My parents met as history graduate students in India. They are interested in the action and aftermath of empire. They like genealogy. They were happy to tell me something about the lives of their families before California. My mother’s father’s family were Massachusetts Puritans. My father’s family came from Virginia...

I could not have known or articulated then that the school district and town and even state I grew up in had roots in the South. I did not know, for instance, that Richmond and El Cerrito, California, were endpoints on one fork of the Great Migration; that the generation-old bungalows we lived in had been built by white and black people who had come out of the dirt-poor, tenant-farming South or the dust bowl and headed west for jobs in the shipyards and at the Chevron refinery....

In my case, the presence of something like a “family tree” in the way my family has kept one, the records and neat genealogies, have actually served as a way of *not knowing* other histories. The genealogical narrative with its clean lists served as a veil shielding us from other inquiry. The tree I knew obscured a hidden tree. For all its expanse of document, what was written was written *in order to* leave out other things.

Three poems from *The Forage House*

Eighteenth Century Remains

Albemarle County

The ridge a half mile down from Monticello.
A pit cut deeper than the plow line.
Archaeologists plot the dig by scanning

plantation land mapped *field*
for carbon, ash, traces of *human dwelling*.
We stand amid blown cypresses.

Inheritors of absences, we peer
into the five-by-five foot ledge.
Unearthed painstakingly, these shards:

two pipe stems, seeds, three greening buttons.
Centuries-old hearthstones are still charred,
as if the fire is only lately gone.

“Did they collect these buttons to adorn?” But no one knows.
“Did they trade, use them for barter?”
Silence again.

Light, each delicate pipe stem,
something someone smoked at last
against a sill-log wall that passed as home,

a place where someone else collected
wedges of cast-off British willowware.
Between vines, a tenuous cocoon.

A grassy berm that was a road.
A swaying clue
faint as relief at finding something left

of lives held here that now vanish off
like blue smoke plumes I suddenly imagine—
which are not, will not, cannot be enough.

Official History

You work as a journalist, pursuing legends

of other people. It is October; gold leaves fall
on your birthday. Little mysteries

swirl with you, a *Tess*—
now hunting out a dented spoon or crest,

some half disguise by which to know yourself.
In Boston or Brooklyn

you carry some rune, afraid of a lover,
dreading the war.

Your friends barter carbon, prepare for pandemics.
In airports you watch tarmacs

flicker through your reflection.
Leave versions of selves in the various cities.

Misplace your doppelgängers.
Little Americas, discarded paperbacks:

O slaveholder & O bastard son.
O blurred stone & out-of-wedlock woman.

Virginia Pars

At first among certain shadows
you felt forbidden to ask whose they were.

So little to inherit: family tree, tarnished pride.
A patrician lilt to certain vowels.

Real money lost, tale crocheted
in Brockenborough doilies.

Still sad alcoholic ghosts came stalking.
Unsolved, always thinking *white* or *colored*,

they slunk by, rank as shame.
Haunted by remains

somehow you were and were not
the Confederate soldiers in your grandmother's nook.

You came
in ripped jeans from California and tasted

their seed, their curd, their underworld of 80 proof
or no proof, a difficult nut, cracked but rotten.

Known unknowns, unknown knowns
lost/not lost like the tobacco barns

on the road South, mud-daubed life
that crawled under your skin

to inhabit ensnare become partway your own.
Ghost snippets, Daddy listening

as Scotch glasses clinked, Granddaddy
killing possums with Lewis the colored man—

You felt: *This/Not this. Self/Other.*
You still wanted for them to explain

their America, their prodigal
half-remembered, always present pain.

Impossible to ask. *Don't speak of race.*
The record's scratched. I don't recall. I never knew.

Anyone who'd tell you's dead. And: No one would tell you.