

Interviewers: Dr. Harbour Winn, Dr. Regina Bennett, Jason Herrera

Interviewee: Tracy K. Smith

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Transcription by: Theresa Hottel

Hottel: Okay, I'm rolling.

Herrera: So, I'll ask you the question I've been asking you many times: what inspired you to write this collection? Was your intention to write a collection of poetry, or did this project evolve from just one or a few poems?

Smith: I've said before that it's really, I think, only a poet's first work that feels like an organic process whereby you're simply writing poems and then you look up and you have enough to make a book if you're willing to do that. With this book, which was my third, I knew I was working toward that as a goal, but I also was hoping that the idea of using space and the universe and science fiction is kind of like metaphors within the book, I was hoping it would just help me break the silence following my second book, which is normal for me, I write something and then take some time off to feel, you know, like I'm allowing myself to come up with new questions and maybe even new words for, you know, the kinds of questions that I have over and over again. The first poems that I wrote for this book were the ones that are most overtly concerned with space and the universe, they often have the universe in the title, and once I had kind of gotten into that zone and begun to have fun watching and rewatching a lot of science fiction films and trying to find a vocabulary, like a visual vocabulary for the realm of space, which is obviously, you know, completely foreign to most of us. My father became ill and passed away and I realized that it was no longer a matter of writing elective poems. I needed to write about him and I needed to use my poetry to help me process my grief over his death and because I was already in space, I thought I'd stay there and see if thinking about the afterlife might be helpful.

Bennett: So was it convenient that your father was a scientist studying space?

Smith: Yeah, well, he was an engineer and the funny thing is I, I don't think you really forget, but I wasn't actively remembering that he had been a, you know, a science fiction lover all of his life, and that he had worked for many years as an engineer on part of the Hubble space Telescope and it was in writing him into the book that I remembered, oh my goodness, of course he should be in this book because he's got a stronger handle on this, or he did, than I ever will, and it's because of him, in a way, that, you know, those images, I have access to them, I felt like it was almost him saying, come on, don't you remember, you know, like from the other side saying, hey, hey, remember those company picnics you used to go to as a kid?

Bennett: Or talking about string theory or something?

Smith: Yeah, exactly, so yeah it felt eerily, like, preordained but it also felt comforting to realize that there was a very clear place for him within this book.

Herrera: Was someone like Carl Sagan at all an influence in what you wrote?

Smith: Well, I think that indirectly, yes, you know, growing up with that voice and some of the documentaries. He's the billions and billions...right, yeah? But it wasn't his work necessarily that I returned to. I was, well, there was a whole part of the researching of this book that I was thinking about the culture and the imagination and the way space played into that, and I think that in a lot of ways some of those poems that are thinking about science fiction are really poems about nostalgia for America in a different era or poems in which I'm thinking, how quaint, that outdated view of the future is, and how quaint our view of the future will one day become. But I leaned heavily on a lot of science writing and a lot of video documentaries that I could access online, like PBS has a really great archive, and was able to, for the brief period of time that it took to begin a poem, learn a little bit and feel like I had a grasp of it, but the fact of the matter is that those facts kind of slipped out of my head all too quickly. But scientists are great about coming up with metaphors for what they are working on, and I had a lot of fun thinking about those. I, in fact, stole some of them. There was one essay that I read where somebody was trying to explain how the universe is infinite, expanding, and also contained, and he talked about smoke inside a balloon. And I thought that was so beautiful and so that, you know, found its way into a poem.

Bennet: Well, you're also grounded in this world, because what I found as I was reading "They may love all that he has chosen and hate all that he has rejected," "life on mars," and "solstice," I found current events going on. And then I thought, well that reminds me of those news poets that are on NPR, and I went back to the archives, and you were the first!

Smith: Yeah.

Bennett: So what was that experience like? And, if they are not familiar with it, tell them what the conceit is.

Smith: Well, I don't know if they're still doing it, but at that time, every month, All Things Considered would invite a poet to come, stay a day in the offices, go to the morning meeting, and you know, pull articles as they were coming in off the printer and think about the day in the news and write a poem that somehow reflects what was going on. And, I always, whenever I get invited to do something that scares me, I think I should probably say yes.

Bennett: That's brave.

Smith: So I did, and I was really excited because I do write a lot of poems that have to do with news events, I live with NPR on almost constantly in my home. And I feel like those

voices are a part of my life, so on one level I got to meet the people behind the voices, but on the other level I got to really think about the way that they work, you know? That program is fascinating, because it's so in depth but they are also producing it up to the minute that these stories are airing. So, I was writing a poem during the day, and the show was already on, and finally I finished my poem and we recorded it, and then a minute or two later they broadcast it. I always say that I'm envious of journalists because of the way that they come into contact all the time with these events and with the people who are responsible for them, and I feel like I got to live a little bit on that side, and see what it feels like to be thinking, and responding and formulating ideas and questions in real time which is not something that I feel like I do as a poet.

Bennett: Right, of course, you couldn't. Well, I love the poem that you wrote, and I didn't write the whole thing down, but "history is in a hurry, it moves like a woman corralling her children in a crowded bus," and it was a story about women in Nigeria or somewhere that were being evacuated because of some conflict going on, and then the last line was something about time and history, or I don't, I don't suppose you remember it, but what was it like to have that pressure to produce a poem?

Smith: It was funny because I was sitting in a green room when it finally came down to just writing the poem, and every twenty minutes someone would stick their head in and say, how's it going, do you wanna bounce any ideas off of anyone, and I was like, oh my god. It was motivation to get the poem finished.

Bennett: Was that the quickest you've ever written a poem?

Smith: Well, I don't really know, I think I've had some, well, there are always those poems that feel like gifts, where they just come. I think I had about two and a half hours to really sit down and focus on that poem. And I think I've done that before, but not, you now, for the same reason.

Bennett: Right. Yeah, and you took that one news story that was really, I think you said something about "I just let something, whatever, bubbled up within me that seemed like the most pressing issue to write about or something.

Smith: Yeah, I needed a story that gave me a sense of individual, that I could imagine, so that was the one that gave me access to the poem, I think.

Bennett: Yeah, and that's what you do with "they may love all that he has chosen" because you take these individual hate crime stories and talk about the perpetrator and the victim and gave them individual personalities.

Smith: That was a really hard and rewarding poem to write, I was upset by this string of murders that had happened over the course of about six weeks. And the poem started out from a place of anger at this problem that we have as Americans. And I had spent a lot of time that year thinking about my father as somebody who might be looking at my life with a different kind of perspective, something that is larger than human. And I decided that his perspective toward me would be characterized by compassion. And I wanted to

sort of push myself to move past my own opinionated anger about murder and hate crimes and see what it would feel like to apply compassion to that context.

Bennett: Yes, and that's what that last part does.

Winn: This, I think, is humming around what we're talking about. I wanted to ask you, in your own writing process, do you view your poetry as politically charged? And does it have to be? Can it not be? Just, what's the relationship of politics and poetry for you?

Smith: I used to be afraid of political poems. I thought they were didactic and I thought that you couldn't write a good poem and a political poem at the same time. I think that was foolish and probably motivated more by just discomfort, fear, than anything else. But once I started to feel more connected to the events in the world, maybe once I felt like I was out of school and living and traveling and feeling like a citizen, those things inevitably made their way into my work because they were what was on my mind. And I don't think I said I want to write political poems, but I wanted to write poems that would give me a different point of access to the things that were happening in the world, that I was aware of, curious about, frustrated by. And I started thinking about how I could do that. I decided that the reason I'd been afraid of what I thought political poems were, had to do with the fact that the poems I had been reading presumed that they had an answer, and they often tended to draw a line between an "us" that is good and a "them" that is bad. I remember after September 11, 2001 there was one anthology that came out rather quickly and I felt like it had a lot of that kind of poem. And the "us" was liberal minded people and the "them" was the Bush administration. Or, you know, the "us" was democracies and the "them" was terrorists. And I was really dissatisfied by those because they were oversimplifying something that we still haven't figured out. And so I said if I can find a way of writing myself into this situation that will also upend my sense of certainty of my own political opinions, then this will be worthwhile. And if I can find a way of erasing that line between "us" and "them," or drawing it differently such that I become "them" sometimes, and the "us" is nebulous, and maybe even that sense of two sided problem becomes irrelevant, then maybe the poems will really be teaching me something. So that's what I wanted to start doing.

I feel like one of the first poems that I consciously wrote that was political, although I don't think it was really the first poem that thought about the social issues, was one that came out of a Comp Lit course I was taking at the CUNY Graduate Center, and it was a course that had to do with the myth of America and American foreign policy, and it was a really ambitious course because we started out by reading these cuneiform texts and we went up to the war in Iraq. And I wanted to try and write a poem that was going to be as epic and ambitious as that syllabus was. And I also wanted to find different stances to take within the poem and to implicate myself, even as a peaceful minded citizen, somehow, in the problems that I was aware of or that I was fearful of. And I really loved doing that, and I decided it was something I shouldn't stop doing. I also felt like it allowed or required me to do a lot of follow up reading on a lot of the things that you can read quickly in the newspaper and then move on from. If you're going to write a poem you have to live with things for a little while so you have to immerse yourself a little more fully in them. But I also think that every poem is political, even a love poem is political, it's interrogating experience in a way that's different, in a way that might not have an agenda, in a way that's going to reject the easy simplification of the terms that

we live in and seek something that might be larger and more troubling but also more satisfying. And I really do believe that if we as writers and readers and people can do that with literature, it changes the way that we live in the world and it changes the way that we accept language that comes at us from a lot of different directions. In some ways I feel like I've been so galvanized by George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" which talks about how thought and speech affect one another, so if we're speaking in euphemisms and accepting pat, easy, unconsidered answers, our thinking devolves, but the opposite is also true and I think poetry is one of the things that can help our thought process and our sense of ourselves in the world evolve.

Winn: I'm thinking of Audre Lord's quote that "it is not our differences that divide us, it's our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences," and I hear you in ways talking about what I think she's talking about.

Smith: Yeah I think so, I mean I feel like every poem that I write and most of the poems that I read are trying to cross some sort of a divide, you know, I always call it an elsewhere, the poem is trying to get to this elsewhere, and maybe it's a geographical elsewhere but sometimes it's just another perspective that we don't automatically understand but that we are being asked to listen to and kind of move toward.

Herrera: What do you think you've learned most from writing this collection, or just writing in general?

Smith: Hmm, wow that's a good question. Well, I feel like the individual poems have kind of revealed different things to me, some of the things are private. I didn't realize when I was working on the poems to what extent I was also interrogating the idea of God in my imagination. I didn't realize that until I started reading the poems aloud and realized how much God was in them, or It was in them, so I think in some ways this was the first time that poetry might have helped me clarify and even maybe codify my own beliefs. I wanted, one of the big ambitions that I had that I didn't even know I had, was to figure out how to make the God that I had received, growing up, that I didn't really question, how to make that figure into something that was large enough to seem capable of containing all the wonder and mystery and terror of, not just the universe, but also just the life that we are familiar with. And it seemed like it would have to be something that was much bigger than the God of the Old Testament, certainly, and also maybe bigger than that vocabulary was capable of containing and something that was compatible with all of the facts that we've discovered about where and what we are. So that was something I didn't know I was working at but I definitely was, and so I think the collection helped me decide what I believed. I mean there's a question in my first book, I mean the title of the question is "what do you believe in?" I mean there's a line in a poem that says "the body's a question, what do you believe in?" And so in a weird way these books which are, you know, have some parallels to one another, because there's an elegy sequence for my mother in the first one and an elegy sequence for my father in the third one, are also, I think, talking back and forth about belief.

Bennett: So when you went back and read the collection that you'd compiled, was that when you put in this first poem, "the Weather in Space?"

Smith: Well, I always, what I do when I'm putting a book together is print up all the poems that might fit, everything I'm like, "oh I did this what do I do with it now?" And I start to organize it; I make these initial piles of these rough sections and then I start to hear what the poems within sections are saying to one another, and then I start trying to listen to what poems are saying across sections, and what I first begin to notice is what's not getting said that needs to get said, and so some poems get written in an attempt to articulate what's missing. In this book it was the longer poems that got written, the title poem, that early poem, "My God It's Full of Stars" the poems I thought might clarify what I was trying to do in the book. But that opening poem, "the Weather in Space," was really a poem I tried to write right after Hurricane Katrina. I was thinking about loss in those terms and wondering what the force is that set that into motion. I could never finish that poem. And then when I was putting this book together I said, "oh maybe I don't need to finish this poem, maybe if I can contextualize it differently it would do something to open the book quietly, but also with a sense of terror and wonder."

Bennett: "Faces radiant with panic." That's pretty darn good.

Winn: The two elegies, I think, probably at this moment in my life really live within me, and I'm wondering, you've written an elegy for your mother, for your father, and now you're a parent, and in a sense you may be able to wonder how your parents felt toward you, and understand them in different ways? I think it's a kind of dynamic, when, as a parent, looking at my mother, my father's deceased, but looking at my mother as a parent. So I wonder about that dynamic of you now being in the role that you wrote a eulogy to, you now, twenty years or so ago, and, you know, does the possible sense of wonder, I mean, do you even wonder what an elegy to you might be that one of your children would someday write? What would you hope such an elegy would be like, you know, in all of that complexity, that emotional intensity?

Smith: Well, I do think about my parents a lot as I am learning how to parent my three young children, and I also feel very close to my parents because I can see them in my kids, and that's just delightful. It's complicated, you know, it's a complicated cycle that we're a part of and I have no idea what it leads to, but I have this idea that there's a really beautiful kind of continuity and if you're looking for it then you can find it in a lot of small ways. I also really, I've been working on a memoir about my family, and in part it's because I want my kids to know my parents. I want them to understand who they come from, and what it was like to be the children of my parents. Also I think in some ways it's also an attempt to be able to have the kinds of conversations that I never got to have with my mom. Conversations about belief. I mean, we talked about that but maybe not in terms of the different crises or dilemmas that I found myself having as I grew older and was sort of individuating myself a little bit from her. But also I'd like the book to be kind of an offering that says "This is who your mom was and is and I want you to be able to be fully and unabashedly yourself." And that's the kind of thing that I hope I can say and show them, but I also know that there are lots of things that, as a child, you don't want to hear from your parents, and I also am mindful of the fact that you don't have parents forever so in some ways the book is something that I hope might become useful to them maybe after I'm already gone. Now, I don't know what a pair of elegies for me would be like. I don't know if it's good luck to think about that, but I know that every elegy has to do with wanting to celebrate and recreate the person that you miss and so I hope that

they'll remember all the crazy aspects of my personality as only they can. But I try not to think about that too much I guess. No matter how often I say, you know, poems put us in search of hard answers and difficult questions, I don't want to think about that just yet.

Bennett: How old is your oldest?

Smith: She's four and a half.

Bennett: Wow.

Smith: She's fierce.

Bennett: I bet.

Smith: Because my husband and I both write, she's always saying "Oh, I'm publishing a book," and she'll be scribbling in a notebook, "Yes, I'm publishing a book." She has a pen name. Her name is Naomi and her pen name is Naomi Quick.

Winn: Sounds like a really personal book and yet you're offering it to us, and that slippery, you know, from the public in the personal...

Smith: Yeah it's interesting what happens, right? It happens with poetry too, but it feels different because a poem is a little bit less direct. But I do think about that a little bit. There are people that I'm writing about that are in the world and capable of picking up the book and reading it. And I try not to think about that while I'm writing because I want to be able to be honest and unselfconscious, but that is a side effect of writing and publishing. I'd like to think that, aside from the events in my life, that, really are not a lot of, like, big events, the book is kind of like a project in reflecting upon and interrogating things like race and religion, and I feel like those are things that might be relevant to other people as well, even people who don't know me, especially, hopefully, people that don't know me. So, I feel like it's a tradeoff that I'm okay with. I feel like I've been helped by so many books that I've read where people were just totally laid bare, you know, by choice, and I feel like those are some of the books that have really saved me in some ways.

Winn: I think of Tretheway, the way you're talking, I mean, she just lays herself open in such a vulnerably wonderful way. And in thinking of Tretheway, not to say that you are in her shadow at all, that's now what I'm trying to say, but you don't seem to have that tension that I think Natasha probably said to us when she was in this room, that the difficulty of the dutiful daughter who receives language from the father. That doesn't seem to be an issue in your life, like maybe in Tretheway's in ways it has been, you know, I don't know since her fathers' a poet. So, yeah, I'm kind of wondering about your artistic identity as female, as daughter, as mother. What, you know, is your mother female tongue? You seem to be in awe of your father but not, you know, under him?

Smith: Well, I think that I'm in awe of people that I love, and they somehow, I think, are responsible for the person I am, not completely, but in a lot of important, and sometimes very quiet ways. But everybody gets to a place where they want to take responsibility for

the person that they are, the people that they are, and I think that the challenge is to find a way within language to be honest about the self and about experience and the questions, and even honest about the people that you love, and that made you. I know that when I was living in California after I'd graduated, after I'd graduated from grad school, I went back to California for a few years. I had a hard time writing with the same kind of honesty and courage that I normally liked to write with and I think it's because I was back in my childhood home and regardless of the fact that I was, you know, an adult, there is something that you revert to, I think, when you're in your childhood home that's a lot, or in part, who you were when you were a kid. When I left California I felt like I was really able to, you know, dive into my material without fear, without shame, without worry that I might sadden or alarm my parents. And for me that psychological distance was helpful.

I don't know if I'd feel that way again if went back, and now, especially now that my parents are gone, I think coming to the place of, you know, writing some of the more recent poems was also about, and definitely in writing the memoir, was about wanting to speak to my parents in ways that I didn't let myself before. It's not like they didn't know who I was, but there were conversations that I never had that said, "Well, this is, you know, I do and don't believe this thing that you taught me. This is how I see it." And maybe, you know, I would have been able to do that down the line. But the book is a way of doing that and I think that any bit of writing is a way of saying something that's difficult to say in real time, in regular speech, face to face. It might facilitate those kinds of conversations but it's something that often precedes those kinds of conversations. And I imagine it's something that we're constantly doing because we're constantly moving out of one version of ourselves and into another version, and ideally each version is characterized by a little bit more insight and courage.

Herrera: What do you struggle with most in your writing, and how do you overcome it?

Smith: I think that I don't really know. I mean I struggle sometimes with individual pieces that I'm working on. I struggle between productive periods. Well, it's actually probably not as much as a struggle as it probably should be, the fact that I'm not writing. But I kind of have learned to trust that when I'm writing I'm open and I'm pushing myself to get past the first possibility and move into a space that might be satisfyingly complex. I'm comfortable with making myself uncomfortable and I feel like that's a good trait. And then when I'm not writing I feel like it's okay, because I imagine that I must be learning something, I must be listening and, you know, like reading and meeting people and developing new questions. Maybe I let those periods go on for longer than they could, but I feel like it's not a race, you know, we have a lot of time to be producing work and I like to think that sometimes silence can be really valuable. It gives you a chance to step into a new vocabulary and a new perspective and also deal with some of the anxiety of not writing which I believe is an important part of being a writer too.

Bennett: Harbour was talking about a daughter's, woman's maybe, not voice, but woman's perspective, perhaps, and when I read this book, I get more, I mean, I don't really sense a gender or a sexuality behind the writing. It's very androgynous and perhaps, in some cases very abstract because you're dealing with issues of god and all that sort of thing. But there's one poem in particular: "When our small form tumbled into



me.” That poem seems to me as a tribute to a moment of conception, is that, am I interpreting that right, or is it a persona you took on?

Smith: No, that’s absolutely what it is, it’s thinking about that moment, you know, when my daughter kind of, like, decided, she was going to be my daughter. I feel like the poems in the last section of that book are the ones that feel most like they come from my sense of myself as a woman. I think about the book as going from thinking about being human to being a daughter to being an American to being a woman, so the love poems are there, and so the poems about childbirth and conception are there. And the strangeness of that felt stranger to me after having passed through the strangeness of the first section of the book. Or even the danger that all of the political or social themed poems are also mindful of. I mean, I was pregnant when I was writing those poems and I felt a real sense of peril and also conflict in terms of bringing somebody into a world that was such a mess. And there’s, I think, a different way that you feel in terms of that question when you’re carrying the child than you might if you were not.

Bennett: Right, I mean, the sense of responsibility to this life and, you know, “What have I done?” And yet it’s described so beautifully and so divinely, almost. And then I get a sense that there’s something in it too, that is sort of a warning to your daughter, I don’t know, about desire and, I don’t know. Like, “This is what you’re going to feel someday, but I don’t really want you to…” I don’t know.

Smith: Well I don’t look at it that way, but I think it is, like, this is what it means, you know, you’re human and there are these poles that you swing between and it’s messy and it’s necessary. And one way or another you chose to come here and you must have wanted that, but there must also be some sense of loss that comes with coming into this world.

Winn: A different direction... Your poetry and films seem to interact, from time to time, in very direct ways and indirectly. Just two examples: I’m thinking of your poem that John Ford’s *The Searchers* informs, or your reference to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001* in “My god its full of stars,” you know, just to name a few. And I even found in reading “Ransom” that you anticipate Paul Greengrass’ *Captain Phillips*.

Bennett: I wrote down *Captain Phillips* in my copy!

Winn: So, I just wonder, what about film and poetry and you?

Smith: Oh, I love film and I loved... I think one of the courses that I took in college that really just transformed my way of thinking about experience and also about poetry was a film course. It was a course that was, Stanley Cavell, the philosopher Stanley Cavell, and he has written on these 1940’s Hollywood screwball comedies that he calls remarriage comedies. I loved reading films and I loved writing papers for that class and watching scenes and thinking about what the gestures and the dialogue and the images add up to and how they inform us and ask, or require us, to feel. And I took a lot of film viewing courses during my MFA, and I think I wanted to learn how to use some of the tools that are available to the filmmaker in my poetry. There are a lot of parallels. The image plays a huge role in the poems, and the way that time can be expanded and collapsed is

something that I feel is cinematic, and, you know, the juxtaposition that you can do in a poem that might be analogous to, like, montage or cross cutting in film, all of that stuff really excites me and I love watching films and thinking about what else they can teach me about the poems I might go on to write. I think one of the reasons I was so captivated by Kubrick's *2001* is the way that he allows silence and slowness to translate into heightened anxiety, which is so counterintuitive but that seemed like something that a poem could also do. So I'm always looking for new things that I can do to, you know, keep doing this thing that I've chosen to do. And I love films. I mean, it's a big part of our culture, the cinema, the movies, and so I feel like it's natural that those things creep into the poetry from time to time.

Winn: I mentioned to you, and Jason and Theresa, and I'm not sure about Regina, but you really need to see Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry*.

Smith: I'll look for it.

Winn: I feel like you'll really connect with it.

Herrera: I'll change the subject again. What do you enjoy reading?

Smith: Oh gosh. I read a lot of poetry because I, you know, try to get my students to read in a lot of different directions and sometimes that means pulling me away from the poems I'm automatically drawn toward. So I'm reading a lot of new voices, one poet that I've been interested in lately is Dorothea Lasky, whose poems couldn't be more different from mine. But they're relentless and open and earnest and very dark and rhythmic. I always go back to Lucille Clifton's poetry because I feel like she's just so full of wisdom and fearlessness about human experience, especially her last poems, thinking about, you know, the next life, I think are just so stunning. But I also have been reading some memoirs because I've been working on a memoir for awhile. I really, I think, like the rest of America, really admire Mary Karr's three memoirs. And Edmund White is a colleague of mine at Princeton who is a novelist who's written a number of really wonderful memoirs. And I love Patty Smith's music and I loved reading her book *Just Kids*. And I also, when I feel like I'm looking for new ideas or areas of interest or knowledge, love reading nonfiction. So, yeah, I wish I had more time. You know I have these kids and it means I have a lot less time to read than I'd like, but that's something that I think is really necessary if you want to write.

Winn: I suspect that time with your kids will lead to many poems.

Smith: Oh gosh, yeah. I wish that I were better at writing down some of the things my daughter says because she's just so funny. But the other night I came home and my husband had his computer open and he said, read the poem that's on my screen. I didn't write it but just tell me what you think." And I read it it was like this little eight line poem. And I said "oh it sounds like maybe sixties protest poetry or maybe black art movement poetry. And I'd just been transcribing things that my daughter said. And I think that poem ended with "young man, come here, I'm gonna rent you a dream." And I was like oh gosh if I could just do a book of found poetry, maybe.

Bennett: You need to channel her! When you talk about reading nonfiction, do you read about science? Because I see intersections between art and science in your poetry. And you mention how scientists are good at using metaphors to describe because it's stuff we don't know what it looks like and so they have to make it, you know, concrete to us. So what are your ideas about the intersection between art and science?

Smith: Well I wish I had a better mind for science because this seems to be a moment especially where, like, physics is moving toward a zone that feels like the zone where art exists or is, you know, so that I think is really fascinating. When I was working on this book I was actively reading, trying to kind of learn some of the terms that might be helpful. That's not always what I do but I feel I'll read articles about science-based events in magazine and in newspapers with a lot of interest and sometimes anxiety so I do think it's part of my imagination. I don't know if artists and scientists are doing the same thing in different ways at all. It's these languages fundamentally are really different and I only feel fluent in one, but I do think that art is capable of examining real stuff, and I know it's certainly my vehicle for understanding things a little bit better, even if it's just a momentary sense of understanding, so I have a feeling that there's more science down the road for me.

Winn: You know, the science and the poetry and I was asking you about film, but I wonder, a little bit vaster umbrella, just the whole idea of arts integration? The way that one art form can talk to another art form or mirror or reflect...and is your husband a visual artist or a painter?

Smith: My first husband was a painter; but we're not married anymore.

Winn: Oh, your first husband. I just, the covers of your books are just so stunning. I just wonder about how the study of different art forms and having them talk to each other, I mean, do you do that in your own classes? Do you think about that yourself? You know, some poets write about photographs or about paintings. We read one last night, you know, at least an imaginary painting.

Smith: Yeah, I think that it sort of just comes out of this sense that there is...okay so a dancer and a poet have different instruments and the language is different, but in some ways the division between different genres is a little artificial. Especially when we're thinking about language, and even poetry and prose, but also song, feels, obviously, connected to poetry. But I feel like sometimes I have to remind myself of that. And music is a huge part of my life and so it comes into my ear, and my head, and therefore my work. I guess I have a voracious interest in the way that other people express themselves and find expression for their ideas, and I'm eager to borrow that if I can? And so it might mean that I'm thinking, "How would I, you know, the physicality of choreography, what would the analogy within a poem be?" And I'll ask my students, "I want you to write a poem in which you're really thinking about that choreography and the blocking, how would you do that? How would you tell a story or investigate a feeling by using physical space within a poem in whatever way seems right for you. There's a moment in some of the workshops where song will come into play, and we read Lorca's essay on the Duende and say, okay, how would you translate this feeling or sound or kind of courage into the words that you will use in your poems, how can you embody that other kind of energy in

language? And I don't know how to do that but I know that it's great to try these different things and so I'll see if I can try it in solidarity with my students or if I can require my students to try things that I'm also interested in getting the courage to try. So I just think it's a natural extension of just being a person and being, you know, interested in feeling and experience and movement and all of it. I don't know that it's codifiable for me. I probably could do more in my classroom to bring in still more genres and art forms. I sometimes teach a workshop at the Bread Loaf School of English in the summer, and that's a really great place because they have actors on campus working on a production but they're also there to visit classes and illuminate different ideas, and so every summer that I'm there I'll ask them to come over and do some sort of acting exercise with my students just to see how it feels. You know, usually in a poetry classroom you're seated and you're just kind of living in your head, but what changes if we stand up and use our bodies, even just for half of the class? How does our vocabulary for the poems that we're reading and talking about change? So I think all of that is really interesting. I don't know what my theory is, but I like that it's possible to turn myself in these different directions from poem to poem and see what happens.

Herrera: While we're on the subject, how does teaching influence your writing? What do you gain most from it?

Smith: Well I like that I'm required to talk about poetry for a living, with smart young people, and I feel like it kind of keeps me honest, too, because if I'm professing this thing as being really important and essential, then I feel like I have to go home and write it too. Especially, watching my students. Every year I work with one or two thesis students who are writing a collection of poems over the course of nine months. And it's amazing what they do, and I feel like it does inspire me in a way. Like, okay they're twenty years younger, and they're just kind of diving into this impossible challenge, and they produce some really great stuff, and it makes me excited about trying to channel that kind of energy as well.

Winn: Now we're sort of indirectly talking about this, but the whole ethos of liberal arts university is certainly being challenged today, it's under attack, and so I wonder about the value of the liberal arts degree. Are we preparing people to have a job to make a living, or are we preparing people for life? And, I don't know Princeton, but certainly here at OCU we're confronted with, you know, "Why teach courses in poetry, why teach courses in the humanities, why teach courses in history?" What about this? You're going to have children growing up, maybe going to liberal arts universities, with all that tuition that they have to shell out.

Smith: They better go to liberal arts universities. I think it's the most important aspect of education. I'm not trying to denigrate sciences, but I feel like the way that we are taught or asked to think and question in the humanities is really fundamental to being citizens in the world, and, you know, as I've said I always use poetry as the lens for this, but I think it really isn't just a poem that asks us to be vigilant within language and to be dissatisfied by easy answers and to think about ourselves as at the center of things which...wait, I don't know if I put that in the list the right way. But the humanities challenge us to question the idea that we are at the center of experience, that our perspective is *the* perspective, and I think that's really necessary. And I also see how some of our market

driven concerns seem to be limiting and making smaller the way that culture works in America, and certainly changing or challenging people's ability to emphasize with other people they don't know, people they don't look like, but also maybe to think about long term repercussions of the choices that we make. I know that sciences do this too. I sometimes feel like, when we think about education policy, I feel like the reason people are being encouraged to go into sciences and math has less to do with the kind of thinking and questioning that those fields do than with careers and even the kinds of contributions that we might make to American prosperity or ingenuity, and that seems to be a little bit wrong-minded to me. But I don't know, maybe I'm fortunate to work in an institution where these questions are not coming up. There's a certain kind of given that I think we work within, which is humanities matter. And fortunately there's not the same kind of external pressure to justify course or whole departments. But I feel like the humanities are probably going to be able to help solve the problem of the humanities. I have faith that that is probably going to be the case. I mean, certainly there are a lot of us who are motivated to do that. Hopefully it's not going to be one of these dystopian science fiction things that lead us to solve this problem but rather conversation. Everyday now I hear in the news people talking about not only cutbacks to humanities courses but also the dire reality that a lot of adjunct professors are living with or in. It's a conversation that I think is good that it's happening in public sphere because it means that people might listen, people who might not even understand why the questions are important are listening to the conversation that the questions are generating, so I have faith.

Herrera: What's the most powerful thing an artist can do? What do you think?

Smith: Well, I feel like a broken record, but I really feel like, just asking these heavy-duty questions, the kind of questions that we often as people, as just private people, don't want to ask. But I think that when you step into your role as artist, maybe because you're part of a community, a large community, that transcends history, maybe it's easier to start asking hard questions.

Winn: I think this is getting, in a way, at maybe what Jason's wondering, but I read somewhere that you feel that writers "are like ambassadors for the art that we've chosen," and so I wonder, and maybe this will be a little repetitious of some of what you've already said to us, but what do you hope to do while you're here at OCU, while you're talking to us right now, or any time you're reading poetry or talking about poetry? What do you hope we'll remember about you as an ambassador for poetry?

Smith: Well, I often meet people who, when they learn that I'm a poet, will say one of two things. One is, "Oh I know a poem, I learned this poem many years ago in school," and they'll begin to recite a poem that they've lived with for decades. But I also meet people who say, "Oh gosh, I don't know anything about poetry. I'm completely intimidated by it." And I hope sometimes that the poems that I read or the things that I might say about those poems can help to break down that sense of incomprehensibility that people sometimes associate with poetry. You know, sometimes people, because of how maybe poetry was introduced to them in school, have the idea that the poem and the poet are in on a secret that the reader is locked out of, which creates a kind of adversarial relationship between poem and reader, which I think is completely backwards. So sometimes I think hearing a poem in a poet's voice can break that anxiety down. Sharing

a poem that feels like it was written right now and for right now can also take away some of the fear that people have about poetry, because sometimes it's poetry that reaches them as if it were a different language simply because it comes from a different lexicon, one that we don't live in anymore. But then the people that have lived with poems for decades, I hope that going to a poetry reading might reactivate that sense of why poems are important and why they stay with us, and then the poem will do the rest, you know.

Herrera: I'm going to ask a question, again, that will change the subject. How did it feel, winning the Pulitzer Prize? I mean, I can't even imagine.

Smith: Oh gosh, that was so surreal. It was my fortieth birthday and, you know, it's such a funny prize because it's so journalist centered that the press is kind of how the news gets broken. There's nobody who calls you from the Pulitzer committee. So it was a funny and wonderful day and it led to a lot of conversations with people in far-flung places about poetry. And I feel very lucky to have been said, "Okay, keep doing this because you're doing it in a good way," at least by the small group of people who are responsible for giving that prize. But I also feel really lucky that I've gotten to go to these places and poetry communities that I wouldn't otherwise have gone to and meet other poets. One of the first events that I did after the prize was announced was a poetry festival in South Korea where there were poets from China and Japan and Mongolia and Korea and it was just wonderful. We didn't speak the same language but there was something wonderful about just eating and drinking and just kind of celebrating this thing and the fact that it really does live everywhere. And I also feel really grateful that the prize puts me in what feels like a little bit closer proximity to a poet like Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first African American to win the Pulitzer in poetry, and there's something really humbling and wonderful about being reminded that this is a continuum that we're on together in a way. But I also don't think about it a lot because there's other stuff, if you want to keep making art, that you have to think of first.

Bennett: does it seem like a huge responsibility?

Smith: I feel grateful and I feel lucky that maybe it means more people are aware of my voice and are listening for it. I don't know if I feel that that's a responsibility because it doesn't mean that I have to say any one thing, but it invites me to keep saying things, if that makes sense. It's nice to know. So often when you're writing a poem you're alone and you don't even know if the poem itself is going to get finished, but it's nice to know that there is someone listening for it, you know. I think every writer needs to know that.

Bennett: Right. Well that reminds me, this morning you mentioned that there was one poem in *Life On Mars* that you had worked on one line for like six years. Which poem was that?

Smith: it's the poem "Cathedral Kitsch." I couldn't figure out how to end that poem for forever.

Bennett: The gold, and, I forgot what else kind of things you had, candles and all that.

Herrera; My class spent about forty-five minutes on that poem.

Smith: Oh really? What did you guys say about it?

Herrera: I'm trying to remember exactly what we said about it, we said a lot. But I think the biggest thing, we were worried about over analyzing it. Are you familiar with Billy Collin's poem, I think it's called "The Poetry Class." Not to beat it over the head, just to kind of wave at it? So think we were all just kind of sharing our experience with it, more than anything. So do you have any advice for any aspiring writers? I mean you teach, so I'm sure you give...

Smith: Yeah, you know everybody says that reading, reading, reading, reading, is the best thing you can do, and it's really true. And I think reading against, well, indulging your own tastes about also reading against your tastes is very important. It can be instructive. When I read a poem I'm interested in I see if there's a way that I can lift up the different apparatus that the poet has been working with and carry them over into my own material and see if I might learn from trying to do things the way that somebody else has done them. I also think it's important for people who want to make a life out of it to really remind themselves that it's the process that they enjoy, and find a way to love the process, find a way to love revision, find a way to love breaking writers block, and also to find a community of people that you can invest in, because it's a very long path and there are lots of moments where you feel alone. There are lots of moments where you feel like the end game of publication is impossibly far away, and yet you've got to keep doing this thing, and so I think that if the process can be the joy then you have a better shot at sticking with it. I think investing in your peers and their work is also a great way of not becoming greedy and selfish and self-interested. You know, there are some rewards for writers but they're not a lot and it can make a person ugly if he or she is really just interested in trying to hoard the pot for him or herself, so investing in the good things that can happen to other people is good.

Winn: we probably should find a closure; we've been barraging you with questions. Are there questions we haven't asked you that we wished you had?

Smith: It's like that moment in the job interview, haha.

Winn: Did you think we would ask you something, or is there something you wanted to say that you haven't"

Smith: No, I think you guys have been very thorough, thank you for your questions. I don't know if there's something I wanted to say that I didn't say, I feel like I've probably said everything twice.

Winn: Thank you for your generosity.