CLAIRE SCHWARTZ

"Moving toward What I Don't Know": An Interview with Tracy K. Smith

"Is God being or pure force? The wind / Or what commands it?" begins "The Weather in Space," the opening poem in Tracy K. Smith's 2011 collection, *Life on Mars*. These boldly roving questions characterize Smith's work. In three books of poetry and a memoir, Smith explores how loss and birth and belief and desire make blurry life's edges. Her poems play those edges in strange music.

Tracy K. Smith was born in 1972 in Massachusetts and raised in northern California. She earned a BA from Harvard and an MFA from Columbia. As an undergraduate, Smith joined the Dark Room Collective, a black reading series and writers' group that fostered the diverse aesthetic summoned in their unofficial motto: "Total life is what we want." Smith's first collection of poetry, *The Body's Question* (2003) was selected by Kevin Young for the 2002 Cave Canem Prize. Her second book, *Duende* (2007), won the 2006 James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets and the 2008 Essence Magazine Literary Award. Smith's most recent collection, *Life on Mars*, was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her 2015 memoir, *Ordinary Light*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Smith is also the librettist for *A Marvelous Order* (2016), an opera about urban planners Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses. She is translating work by the Chinese poet Yi Lei.

Among her many honors and awards are an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, a Whiting Award, and a Rona Jaffe Award. She is a professor at Princeton University. I spoke with Smith in Brooklyn in May of 2014, at Princeton in March of 2015, and by e-mail in December of 2015. The spaces between our conversations were punctuated by steep changes: the birth of her twins, a move from Brooklyn to New Jersey, her appointment as Director of the Creative Writing Program at Princeton, and the publication of *Ordinary Light*.

Claire Schwartz: What do you hear that you feel summoned by, that provokes a rise in you?

Tracy K. Smith: The mark of a poet or writer. Sometimes coming together with other poets feels almost the way church is supposed to feel. There's something about that community that I really claim. Maybe it's because I believe that to be a poet means we've chosen a different kind of listening. A different kind of empathy guides us.

Sometimes I feel like one of the struggles I have as a person and as a writer is to figure out my relationship to faith, which is one of those things that I feel marked by and belong to. I have a lot of ambivalence, and, in a lot of ways, the memoir is really an exploration of that. But when I come into a conversation with somebody else who is willing to acknowledge belief in some way, I feel kinship there.

What else? I do think that race is one of those things, but it's very layered and nuanced. In working on my memoir, one of the big things that I kept coming back to is how to describe this feeling that I've had for so long. I couldn't put it into language as a child. I think, really, it's empathy; but it caused me a kind of fear or silence around the events in American history that my parents or my grandparents would have been a part of—the things that would have hurt them. The history of Jim Crow is a big part of the history that I come from. But I'm thinking, too, about the ways that we now are treated. The language is different, but—considering all of the verdicts that have come down in these past years—it's the same kind of thing. When I think about black Americans, I feel a real kinship.

When I think about being called as an American, it's almost the opposite feeling. I feel marked by that, and reluctant. I feel implicated in so much of what we as a nation have set into motion—even in terms of the things that feel comfortable on our side of the table.

CS: The issue of Americanness seems present in all of your poetry collections, but differently so. *The Body's Question* refracts it primarily through a lyric "I." *Duende* calls up the question of the nation explicitly and immediately in the long opening poem "History." *Life on Mars* exceeds not only the country, but the planet. Yet this collection somehow feels most deeply engaged with the question of America.

TKS: Absolutely. That was one of the driving forces behind the poems in *Life on Mars*, before they started picking out their own interests. I wanted to write dystopic poems as a way of thinking about America and the future that America is laying the tracks for. So poems like "The Universe Is a House Party" or "The Museum of Obsolescence" are really, as I see them, poems about America. And then, of course, there are

those overtly political poems that are thinking about social events that America is not yet clear-sighted enough about yet, because it's too soon.

In the section of "They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected"—where victims of hate crimes write postcards to their murderers—the postcards are written from American landmarks. That was just an urge or a whim, but I now realize that the poem, or my own conscience, felt comfortable saying, "This is an American problem." Maybe that partly goes back to what I've grown up knowing—and for most of my life, being afraid of saying: that America has hurt my people. It's so obvious, but perhaps silence is the shape that trauma took.

So my sense of what it is to be American has always been conflicted. That said, I feel like maybe I only could have been a poet here because I've also been the recipient of a lot of luxuries. And maybe that's the only way that I can feel comfortable speaking back.

CS: Is that conflicted sense of American identity connected with your search for belief?

TKS: I think it must be. I think about who made me, and I think about how the black church was a part of my parents' lives growing up in the South. I think about the role of that institution in creating hope and structure and the sense that there is justice—something larger that's watching and keeping tabs. That came through to me. That's how I was raised. Church and the language of belief were non-negotiable. Partly, it had to do with the spiritual side of things, but I think another large part of it was that this is how my parents knew to keep a family intact.

When you talk about belief with artists and intellectuals, it's so easy to create extra distance, but I don't think there's as much distance as language sometimes makes it seem. I feel like a faithful person. I don't necessarily like a lot of the language that comes from religion. But I like a lot of the mystery.

CS: Do you remember any of the texts that you loved as a child?

TKS: In one of my fifth-grade textbooks, there was an Emily Dickinson poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" I inadvertently memorized it. It almost felt like the speaker and I were in collusion with one another—like there was this amazing space the speaker had invited me into. I liked that sense of private mischief that poetry seemed to be able to

extend. And that's when I thought, "I'm going to sit down and write a poem, and it's going to be really important."

CS: Was that the first time you made a conscious attempt to write a poem?

TKS: As a kid, I used to love writing rhymes and stories and things like that, but fifth grade was the first time that I thought I would write something that was smart, something that was going to be really important. That was the year I said, "I'm going to write free verse. I'm going to think about ideas."

CS: What in the conviction to take ideas seriously and to write something smart led you to poetry?

TKS: I think in large part it had to do with that Emily Dickinson poem. And I also read "The Diaries of Adam and Eve," Mark Twain's really wonderful story. It's quite funny and playful. So the combination of those two things—the Dickinson and the Twain—made me feel as if I wanted to write using a compressed kind of language, something that would speak to experience.

And why a poem instead of a story? Well, that poem was inside me. I would find myself walking to school and hearing it in my head or talking to someone and hearing it in the background. Maybe I liked the idea that a poem was small enough that it could get inside of you and stay.

CS: Do you remember what it felt like when you left California for Harvard? Do you recall any of the questions you were holding?

TKS: I was aware that Fairfield was a small town with lots of limitations. So, when the time finally came to leave, I was really excited, thinking that my life would finally start. But just weeks before I left home, my mom was diagnosed with colon cancer. She was going to be undergoing surgery right after my departure. I knew what that meant, but I also didn't know exactly what that meant. She said the tests were positive; they'd found cancer. I remember thinking, "Positive. That must be bad if they found cancer."

During those years at school, the reality of her illness would kind of come and go. The first two and a half years, she really urged me to believe that everything was fine because the cancer had been eradicated. It was in remission. I didn't know that things came back. I was so young.

But I also remember not wanting to talk much with people about the fact that she'd had surgery because the way they reacted made me feel nervous, like, "Maybe there's more to this story that I'm not able to grasp, or that I don't want to live with." So in some ways I felt like it was a little bit of a secret until the end of my time at Harvard, when the cancer came out of remission. At that point, I was forced to come more to terms with what this would mean.

CS: What did coming to terms look like?

TKS: After I graduated, I went home to California for a year. I knew that I needed to go home and be with my mom because she was coming to the end. And then I stayed because I hadn't made any plans. Partly it was about knowing I needed to go home and thinking, "What's the point of coming up with other things to do?" But I think that's the smaller part of it.

The larger part was that I knew poetry was important to me, and I knew that I wanted it to be the central thing in my life. That was what I wanted to do. That was the vocation I'd chosen. But I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know how you went about living that life. Although I had teachers and I saw that they taught, I didn't know how they'd gotten to that point exactly. I had one or two friends who had MFAs, so I knew that must be part of it. But I hadn't taken the time to figure out how I would do it. So going home was really about not having decided how I was going to make that wish real. While I was at home, I ended up applying to grad school. The next year I went to Columbia.

In California, I also realized how much writing and reading poetry was helping me to deal with the inevitability of my mom's death, and then the grief. I was a mess, but if I could go upstairs to my room and read—or I had some audiocassettes with poets reading, and I would listen to their voices—I felt centered in a way. I'd grown up in a household where we went to church. We would pray. I did that, too, but what really spoke to me was the voice of poetry.

CS: Who were some of the poets you were holding close during that time?

TKS: Seamus Heaney. He was the person who really made me want to start writing, so his books were like bibles to me. I would read his poems and try to imagine creating that kind of presence through words,

but I'd also just be grateful for what he'd done. "Clearances," a sequence of elegies for his mother, was so important to me during that time.

Who else? Larkin. I had his collected poems. And Rita Dove and Yusef Komunyakaa. They were the two contemporary poets who made me really want to become part of the African American poetry tradition. I remember *Thomas and Beulah* and *Magic City*. Those were the books that I had, of hers and of his. I felt like I could access those poems effortlessly. In fact, I remember writing a lot of poems in my workshop that were kind of imitations of the poems in *Thomas and Beulah*. I didn't really know my grandparents, but I could imagine my parents as young people, and writing about them helped me to start thinking about craft.

CS: And Seamus Heaney had been your teacher at Harvard?

TKS: Yeah, and that's another reason why those poems were important. Everything people say about him is true. He was so generous and kind and jovial. We were writing our poems, and I, for one, was so serious about it. I think I wanted to perfect my poems because I felt like I didn't have control over much else. I didn't have material. I wasn't writing about my mom. I was kind of just writing. So much seemed to be at stake. And he was such a gentle, loving teacher: "That's an interesting image. What would happen if you did this to it?" Kind of nudging me—and probably everyone else—toward our own material.

You always worry about finding your own voice, and I know that in that class I was trying to imitate him—not because I wanted him to know that, but because his were the poems that I loved so much. And he was really good at coaxing us toward something that might feel more authentically our own. For our last class, he took us all out for dinner, and I remember just being so sad.

"Is it going to be okay? What's going to happen?"

"It's going to be okay. Don't worry, it's going to be okay."

He signed my copy of *Seeing Things*, which was, I think, his current book at the time, with a quote from Yeats: "And wisdom is a butterfly, and not a gloomy bird of prey." I felt chastened, but also like, "He's right! I'm going to try and be joyful about this. I'm not going to be so gloomy." Poetry is work, but it's work that feels like fun. I always try to remind myself of that, and it's his voice that I'm trying to remind myself of.

CS: How did the Dark Room Collective figure into your making of a writing life?

TKS: That was a big factor in poetry sticking for me. I met Tom Ellis in Cambridge. I thought, "Oh, here's this young guy who calls himself a poet. *I'm* supposed to be a poet." At first, I had that sort of angry feeling that you get when somebody else is doing what you want to do. And then I said, "Wait. He knows how to do this. Look at all these books he's showing me. He knows where poetry is." I learned that he was part of the Dark Room reading series, and I started going to those readings. Then I started doing lighting at the readings, so I was there all the time. I was thrilled by the chance to hear poets read their work. And afterward, I would go out to dinner and eat with them and laugh with them and try to be at ease, even though I was nineteen. You're never really at ease at nineteen.

Oh! A big, big important fact was that Dark Room was writers of color—mostly black writers, but there were other writers of color that came to read in the series as well. That did something so important to counterbalance the voices that I was hearing in my classes. I didn't read Yusef Komunyakaa or Rita Dove in my classes. I read them because of the Dark Room. And so by the time I started taking poetry workshops, those were the voices that were really active in my ear.

That was an important moment in history, too. It was the early '90s. The canon, as far as I could tell, in terms of contemporary voices, was W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Louise Glück, and Jorie Graham. The Academy of American Poets was such a homogenous organization. I remember very clearly when Lucille Clifton was inducted as one of the Chancellors of the Academy. I remember the outcry that led to that.

Now, I feel like American poetry is so much more—not just representative, but dynamic. As far as I'm concerned, the revolution in African American poetry has saved American poetry from sameness and stasis and irony and a lot of things that are deadening.

CS: Did the Dark Room Collective still feel nascent when you came into it? Was there a sense that it would become the crucial literary incubator that it did?

TKS: Well, it was not until 1992 that I got connected to Dark Room. So it was already up and running; in fact, it had already moved out of the house that it started in, where a lot of the Dark Room members lived together. It was in the Boston Playwright's Theater at BU, and then it went to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. So it was kind of grown-up. It wasn't a fledging collective anymore.

I don't know what people were projecting in terms of the Dark Room itself. I know that a lot of people just wanted to write poems and publish books. And there came a time—around the same time I graduated from Harvard—when Tom [Ellis] and Sharan [Strange] and Kevin [Young] were going to grad school. There was this idea, "Okay, we fostered this collective, and now it's time for us to foster our own craft and move ahead." So I don't know that they thought, "This is a movement." This was something we did, something we created together. We were able to meet and come to know some of our literary idols—people who we imagined to be our literary parents. But there comes a time when you've just got to get down to work.

CS: What was your path to graduate school?

TKS: So, after college, I'd gone back to California and, after my mom died, I started substitute teaching in my old school district. That's really good motivation to make a plan! [*Laughing.*] So, after having spent more time thinking about what poetry meant to me and how it helped me live, I applied to Columbia. I poured all my heart and mind into that application and was admitted.

The next year, I went to New York. I loved every aspect of being there and being in the program. I was really lucky. My classmates and I fell in love with each other. We were all so young. None of us had been out of college for very long. We were living this student life in New York City and feeling so naive and hopeful and excited and happy. We were going to readings together and encouraging one another and trying to inspire one another to write. It was a great two years. I racked up a lot of debt. New York is an expensive place to be. Columbia's an expensive program. But even that made it feel more real to me. Now I would probably make a different choice, but at that time it just felt like, "This is the most important thing to me. I'm going to invest everything that I have and much that I don't."

CS: How did your writing change during that time?

TKS: When I was an undergrad, I wanted my poems to be as tightly crafted as possible. They looked like Phillip Larkin poems, and they behaved in that way. When I was at Columbia, I had material for the first time in my life. I was writing about my mom. They were poems that were still cowing to the wish to resolve everything, to undo the

non-undoable thing: the fact of death. So, in a lot of ways, they failed; but they were freer.

My thesis was thirty-five poems, and most of them were about my mom. One of my readers hated it. He was like, "This is so infantile and narcissistic." Now that I evaluate student theses, I think he was probably wrong in approaching student work with that kind of crazy authority. It shut me down. For months, I wasn't writing. And then, finally, I thought, "Maybe I'll do something else. Maybe I'll try and write fiction." So, after Columbia, while I was doing a second year of the Stegner fellowship in California, I wrote some stories. But it was hard. I'd lost a lot of faith.

And the Stegner was a different environment. Columbia was generative. The feedback there was like, "This is great. Try this." It was really supportive, and the criticism was gentle. At Stanford, the assumption was that the poems you wrote there were going to be your first book, so the feedback was more rigorous. The combination of that response to my MFA thesis and the critical climate at Stanford shut me down for a while.

I turned to photography for about a year during this extended writer's block. I'm so grateful for that because I learned that I didn't have to write poems that were driven by statement, which is what I'd always done. Sometimes I would get stuck because I didn't know what happened next, or what the prevailing idea was that I was offering the reader. Taking pictures gave me a different vocabulary for thinking about the poem's authority because I realized that images could do so much—in terms of feeling, in terms of narrative, in terms of creating corollaries within the emotional layers of the poem. And so when I did get back into writing, everything felt different. I felt so free. I felt like I could say what I knew, and when I stopped knowing things, I could just look and describe what I saw or imagined seeing and then build on that.

So I came out of that writer's block and into a really good place in terms of not being chained down by fact, not being chained down by knowledge. I could invent things. I could draw from other people's stories, which I had never really done (except for writing about my parents, but they were still *my* parents). I realized that my material was limitless. That was the feeling, the permission, that I left Stanford with.

It wasn't for another few years that I finished my first book—2002, the same year that I sent it out and won the Cave Canem Prize. That book was coming from a place of—well, a lot of things. From living on my own and moving back to New York and having a marriage that I probably knew from the beginning wasn't going to last. All of that cre-

ated a really active sense of material for me—and also, permission. If I could manage a life with all of these different variables, then I felt like I also had the ability to come back to my poems and make them do what I needed them to do.

So I gave myself permission to say things that speakers in poems say but I'd never thought *I* could say—to tell stories that weren't necessarily my own stories, and to let pieces of myself come into those other stories. When I found that there were gaps in what I knew, or even in what I could imagine, I would let myself fill in the gaps because I was beginning to have powerful experiences and questions and certain ideas that resembled answers.

So, it was an interesting arc. My first years of writing poetry were really about learning how to build solid poems. It wasn't until much later that the real material and my own courage to explore it came in—to give shape to some of the ideas of craft that I had developed.

CS: You say that some of your poems failed because they were trying to undo the non-undoable. Did you have an idea of what success meant?

TKS: I remember I had a meeting with Alice Quinn, who was one of my teachers. She's wonderful. I showed her some poems, and she said, "You're writing about your mother's death, but every one of your poems is trying to line things up neatly. It doesn't necessarily need to be that way. Maybe it shouldn't be that way." She said, "Maybe it's too soon to be writing about this." When she said that, I pulled down the shutters: "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

But I think she was right. I needed time in order to approach the material with a lighter hand. The few poems in my first book, which I wrote during that time, were beginning to understand that I could allow unresolution to anchor the poem; or, I could change the facts in a way that it would be clear to the reader that that's what I was doing.

In *The Body's Question*, there's a sequence of elegies called "Joy." And one of the elegies—one of the last poems I wrote at Columbia—is remembering a moment by the fire with my mom when I was a child. I couldn't figure out how to end that poem, and then I realized that I could not only change the verb tense; I could reverse the direction of time. And so that poem ends,

We sat in that room until the wood was spent.

We never left the room.

The wood was never spent.

I realized then that I could let need determine how things happen in a poem. Not in a way that was undoing what happened, but in a way that calls into question that very need to undo. I felt really excited by that. That felt like a huge discovery.

CS: At what point did you have a sense of writing *The Body's Question*? When did you start thinking about your work as toward a book?

TKS: After I got that thesis report, I couldn't even look at the manuscript because I knew it needed so much work. So I tried to forget about those poems altogether. They were just sitting in my computer. I didn't even print them. And then, one day I was just sitting in my apartment in Brooklyn and said, "You know what? I'm tired of hiding from these poems. I want to look at them and see."

They were all unfinished. I printed them, and I spread them out. I sat there and finished each poem. It was really liberating because I didn't have anybody to show the work to, none of those voices that can stay in the back of your mind and hinder the choices you make. I was on my own in this apartment deep in Brooklyn. And it was almost as if I had this adrenalized intuition, this great collision of all the voices from my past that had been trying to help me. Suddenly, I understood what they wanted to say, and I could apply those lessons. I said, "Oh my god. I think I might have a book here."

CS: How did you think about the architecture of *The Body's Question*?

TKS: That was something we had talked about a lot at Columbia. I had even taken a class on the architecture of first books. I was really mindful of how sections work, that there's a journey that the book as a whole is mapping out. I just said, "I'll start with other people's stories, and maybe that will allow me to move toward my own material." So that book goes through all of the persona poems—the immigrant voices and the poems that are imagining other people's lives in Mexico and in New York—to the poems about my mother to the poems about the life I was living at that point. Those other voices in the first section gave me the courage to write poems that were true to my own experience.

It's not coincidental that my mom is in the middle of the book. So much of what I wanted to say when I was writing the book were things that I wanted to say to her. She passed away when I was still a child—or

still acting like a child and hiding the facts of my life from her. So, in a way, having her as the center allowed me to feel like I was speaking to her. In specific moments, the poems become conscious of that.

But I also love thinking about things like the first and last line of each poem. I'll put the poems in order, and I'll just read the first and last line of every poem to see what the connection between one and the next is—where one poem leaves you and the next poem picks up. Or, I'll think about the very first line of the book and the very last line of the book and what kind of gesture they represent. Is it a gesture toward hope? Is it a gesture toward something bleak?

CS: How do you want the reader to move through the book?

TKS: I want someone to move through the book sequentially. Ideally, all in one sitting. I want the reader to just listen. That's the way I read. I just want to hear the story, hear what the speakers are telling me, trust that they're saying "come here" for a reason.

But I don't think about a reader when I'm writing poems. This is what I believe: if a poem is realized, then the speaker or the poet's investment—and I think there's a little bit of a gap between those two things, though in some ways they align themselves with one another—is transferred to the reader. And if I can trust that to be true, then I can dwell in the process of writing—moving toward what I don't know and toward the discoveries that poems, I believe, are constantly making.

Of course, there also comes a time when I want to make sure the reader understands what's going on. But I like to think of the encounter between me as the poet and the language that becomes the poem as utterly private. In this space, I can ask anything of the poem.

CS: What did you learn between *The Body's Question* and *Duende*?

TKS: I learned that I didn't need to anchor everything in the "I." When I finished *The Body's Question*, I felt, "I've told my story. I've gotten this off my chest. I'm tired of myself. I'm going to let go of the first person." Of course, I didn't. But "History," the long poem at the beginning of *Duende*, was really an attempt to do something else. To satisfy a different kind of urge about space and history and society that felt, to me, epic. That contracts back to the local and private. I think that's because poetry is really good at excavating spaces that are at once intimate and immense.

Still, there's something of the ambition of "History" that I've held onto. I realized that I could learn a lot about the world by writing poems about the world—especially if I was writing poems about things I didn't know very much about. That hasn't gone away. The idea that the poem can help me become a better citizen and a more empathetic person is something that pushes me again and again.

CS: What about *Life on Mars*? How did you come to that?

TKS: After I finished *Duende*, there was what felt to me like a long silence. I wasn't really writing poems. A lot happened during that time. I fell in love with my current husband. I worried, "Did I sacrifice poetry because now I've found the right person?" And so finally, I said, "Okay, I've got to break the silence." So I did what I always do: I looked on my computer. I went through the things that didn't get included in the previous book. And I found the poem "Sci-Fi," which I'd written while I was writing *Duende*. But to me if there's a genre that characterizes *Duende*, it's the western. So I had said, "There's no place for 'Sci-Fi' in that book." But what could that genre do? How could it get me going again?

Science fiction would allow me to look at those things that I always look at, but I would have to tilt the lens a little bit differently. So I started writing poems that were thinking about dystopian futures. My husband and I watched a lot of sci-fi movies. We watched all of these Charlton Heston movies. I've always loved Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, so we watched that. I wanted to find a way to bring some of those conflicts into the poems. That visual sensibility, those anxieties.

And then, rather quickly, my dad became ill and died. I was back in the space of grief. But it was different because I was older, and because I had already lost my mother. I was invested in imagining what I needed to believe they'd become a part of. It wasn't as easy as just saying, "This is what my mom believed: they're in heaven." That didn't feel real enough, or complicated enough. Heaven didn't match up with the view of the heavens that we now have because of all these scientific instruments. So, I was trying to think, "What if it's like this? What if it's like this? What if it's like this?" And I would do that in a poem.

CS: Many of the poems in *Life on Mars* draw on the kitsch or the retro from those sci-fi movies. What is it about that particular aesthetic that's useful in prying open those questions?

TKS: Well, it points me back to another period not only in my life, but also in America's life. I feel like that's what science fiction really is: "We're worried about the Cold War, so let's make a film in which we create a projection of that threat in this other form." I was thinking, too, about how, even in visual terms, those things date; they fall apart. "Look at this vision of the future where everything's so square. It's so old and so touching." I felt like I could locate my own life within those different stages of the genre.

Then I became pregnant. Another thing science fiction does is to ask: "What are we doing right now, and what kind of future is that going to lead to?" Because I was pregnant, that felt so urgent.

CS: Questions are so present in that book. There are so many. And so many that are so immense.

TKS: The revelation that I didn't have to use knowledge to set everything in motion in a poem had a lot to do with realizing that there are a lot of questions in poems, and they're usually not answered. I realized that I didn't have to solve the problem. I just had to dwell upon it, live in it, feel it, make it present, and speak to it. That was so liberating to me. I tell my students this: often, the most honest stance you can take is that of questioning. The most you can be certain of is that of which you wonder.

CS: Has your poetic scope shifted? "History," the multi-part poem that opens *Duende*, explicitly marks the poem's voice as epic: "This is a story in the poem's own voice. / This is epic." In *Life on Mars*, the scope is still vast, infinite, but the poems that bookend the collection are sparse. Is the epic still something you're thinking about?

TKS: I think the epic is always there as a possibility because that sense of expansiveness can help me. It does different things. It creates a space, historically, for narrative, but it also opens up this other psychic layer. There's a sweep, and there's something that happens outside of story that we have to take in in the wake of the story. That, to me, feels really close to the thing that poems do—that kind of invisible work that makes poems poems, the presence or the tone that we are receiving as we receive the language. I think that's what people hang on to.

So what is poetry, at its core, really trying to do? I think it's trying to touch that other thing that's bigger than language, that doesn't require language. That's different from what I was doing in prose. Not because

I wouldn't want to write prose that reaches outside of language, but because I think a poem speaks to a different part of the mind and self. While the prose in my memoir drew from more than just the knowledge part of the mind, it spoke through that. Poems resist prioritizing knowledge, I think. At least, the poems I find myself drawn to resist that.

CS: Maybe there's something about the compression of the poem—how it can hold immense distances in very little space.

TKS: Yeah. And as we've discussed, I think poems live in questions—even when they're recreating things that are known. And maybe because the paragraph is driving toward arrival, there's something absent in prose that the poems have to generate. It's a different relationship between the tangible and intangible.

CS: Are there lessons from poetry that equipped you to write *Ordinary Light*?

TKS: I think the lesson from poetry that was most useful to me in writing this book had something to do with starting without a plan or course of action and seeing where the text itself led me. That's how I embark on a poem, and it means that I'm constantly going back to see what I've said and what clues it might house as to where I ought to go next, what I ought to say next. The funny thing about that process in terms of narrative is that it subverts the primacy of the narrative thread; it suggests that the plot-based story is not the only or even the main story, that something else will emerge as central or unifying.

That was really helpful to me, because it took me several tries in each chapter, let alone each draft, to get to what felt like the real heart of the matter. I started out cleaving to the rudimentary narrative, asking myself, "What happened? And what happened next?" But it was the accumulation of "extra-narrative" threads—of nuance, of images, of subtle trends and themes—that allowed me to gather something useful from the events of my life.

Writing *Ordinary Light* taught me so many things about my life. Initially, I thought I was writing this book just to allow my daughter—now my three kids—to know my parents. I thought I was just going to be telling stories about my parents and creating—or recreating—a sense of my family in those early days when we were all together under one roof. And then I realized that, because the story has to come through me and my experience and my understanding of my experience and my

understanding of who these other people were for me, it became my story. That's not what I intended to do, but it's really exciting to find meaning that I didn't know was there.

I never have figured out how to talk about race in my poetry in a way that feels authentic and organic, and *Ordinary Light* is a book in which I'm thinking so much about race. So that's been really exciting, too, because I feel like I have a lot of ideas about the way race shapes our experience. Things that, as a black person growing up in California, or in America, in this time period—the '70s, '80s, '90s—I probably intuitively sense and maybe talk about; but writing meant that I had to mine those ideas in a different way.

CS: Has your poetic "I" carried through to the memoir? Or is that a completely different first person?

TKS: Even if a poem is about my life, I know that people who read poetry know what assumptions they should and shouldn't make. In *Ordinary Light*, there's no ambiguity. It's a completely transparent "I." The "I" of the memoir is in the past; but it also lives in the present, in terms of what present awareness yields in considering past experience. It's not completely distinct from the "I" that I might be imagining or listening to when I'm writing a poem, but it's doing a different kind of work.

CS: There's a passage I love in *Ordinary Light*: "Pain. The word itself doesn't hurt enough, doesn't know how to tell us what it stands for." In what different ways do you deal with language's inadequacy in prose and in poetry?

TKS: There's a beautiful Jack Gilbert poem called "The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart." It's about how language almost suffices for these huge things that we feel and live. Poetry is so great because it can conjure those feelings through association. Images can take over for statements, and they can project feelings onto the reader. Poems can also distort our sense of experience so that it becomes properly calibrated—so that we can receive from a poem things so extraordinary, so unordinary, that they can't be described in ordinary terms.

Prose was good in a really different way because it gave me the chance to approach things from so many different directions in a single paragraph. In prose, I can do the work of thinking something through and saying it—but also responding to it, and trying to understand why it might be. All of that can happen: your initial sense, and then your

misgivings about your initial sense, and then your retrospection. All of that, in language on the page. There's overlap between the two forms, but what I really learned while I was writing *Ordinary Light* is that there are other capacities in prose that might be helpful, and they were.

CS: Light—at least in the Enlightenment strain—conjures truth, *the* way, something extraordinary. It's a striking contrast with "ordinary." How did you arrive at the title *Ordinary Light*?

TKS: For years, I had a working title in mind that I liked the sense of, but it was far too long: *After Everything That Is Happening Has Happened*. I told myself that the right title would present itself when the book was done, but I remember finishing the book and still not knowing what I should call it.

One afternoon, I had a conversation with my colleague Edmund White about how he titles his books. He suggested that I look through the manuscript for a quiet, simple image or phrase that might be able to take on some of the weight of the book's large concerns. When I did that, I realized how frequently images of light occur in the writing. I think my Christian upbringing probably hardwired me to embrace that Enlightenment view of light, but the book is also mostly set in California, where the color scale and the power of daylight really do feel extreme—at least in my nostalgia-tinted recollection. The scene from which I ultimately derived the title takes place soon after my mother's death, and the urgency and simplicity of the moment made me feel like it might serve as a good anchor for the book.

CS: The book's epigraph is from James Baldwin: "But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light." Why this epigraph? Is the light in the epigraph the light in the title, or is there space between the two?

TKS: I've loved that Baldwin passage since I read "Sonny's Blues" as an undergraduate. I think I intrinsically recognized that particular feeling of time, history, and safety that exists in those types of rooms. It's a feeling made more poignant by all that encroaches upon it—though of course as a child those things are harder to name. So much of the book, for me, focuses on the deep kinds of awareness that inhabit our lives as silence. The sometimes-grim understanding that sits just beneath the surface, just out of the frame. I wanted to invoke that here, and to call

privately upon Baldwin and his miraculous syntax as a guiding voice as I wrote.

There's got to be distance between my title and that epigraph. Or, rather, I suppose I'm asking the image of light to be many things at once. That feels true to life for me. It strikes me that the most searing and startling features of our lives—the many different sources of light or enlightenment, if you will—are by nature varied and contradictory.

CS: In *Ordinary Light*, you powerfully evoke childhood, where common sense has not completely predetermined meaning. You hold open space for the roving, daily wonder of the miraculous, from reading bible stories with your mother to incubating quail eggs with your father. At the same time, the narrative hand of the book feels sure—guided by the insight of the adult who has emerged on the other side of childhood. Would you talk a bit about coming to voice and point of view in this memoir?

TKS: That's reassuring to hear! Getting to a place where the point of view felt both accurate and productive was a long trial-and-error process. The first many chapters that I wrote were set in present tense, which helped me feel that I was really getting back to the time in question. But it locked me out of retrospect, where most of the insights I was hoping to arrive at seemed to hover. And so I went back and inserted the narrative distance, which allowed me to add in some real-time reactions, realizations, and questions. Ultimately, it fostered the realization that the book could serve as a kind of meeting ground for my child and adult selves.

CS: You begin *Ordinary Light* with the scene of your mother's death. Why did you choose to start there?

TKS: Well, writing about that loss was my primary motivation. But while I was working on some of the passages that precede my mother's death and even her diagnosis, I began to feel as though I had a secret I was keeping from the reader. It began to feel wrong each time I mentioned my own childhood fears for my mother's safety or my own first acquaintances with smaller kinds of loss. It felt like a very dishonest treatment of the material, because I of course knew what everything was leading to, while the reader could not. And so I decided to place the death scene at the opening. I thought that would level the playing field and give the reader the same knowledge from the outset that I was

operating with. It seemed like only then could I imagine that the reader and I were in joint pursuit of whatever sat within or beyond that huge central catastrophe.

CS: This is a story about so much: childhood, family, coming to self-awareness as a social being—understanding blackness in the world—school, nature. It is also a writer's story, a story self-consciously made in and of language. You write, for example: "When [my father] said the word *birds*, the *r* made an open-throated windy sound, as if it had taken flight...." What did writing prose teach you about what language can do? Or, put differently: did you learn anything new about yourself in language through the process of writing *Ordinary Light*?

TKS: I have the feeling that the greatest lesson for me came from the shift in genre from poetry to prose. My initial instinct in writing was often to leave things under-articulated, to allow images to be suggestive of feelings and ideas, but to hold back from actually naming the feelings or explaining the ideas. I think that has to do with the way poetry works for me. It has to do with the powerful visceral impression that sound and image can impart. I think it also has to do with the leaps that enliven poems: the way that one idea can lead not to explication but rather to departure. But in writing prose and gradually learning to surrender some of my reliance upon those kinds of tools, I was forced to explain, to describe, to interrogate my material in a new and sometimes frightening way. What it ultimately imparted was language for the palpable but still somehow nebulous feelings characterizing so much of my childhood. It forced me to recognize the kinds of silences that had run through my life: silence around the question of race, of history, of belief. Writing in prose taught me to speak into those areas of silence.

CS: Are there questions that you're holding close right now?

TKS: I've been thinking about Lucille Clifton as a poet of the earth and the environment and the planet in a way that we don't always talk about, and I want to find my own language for talking about this world, the planet, the environment. But I also want to find ways of enacting some of my anxieties and feelings that have to do with the history of the now. A couple of years ago, I was invited to contribute a poem about the Civil War for an exhibit at the Smithsonian. I wouldn't have otherwise written a Civil War poem, but I feel like it's so relevant to these prob-

lems that we're finally speaking about in terms of race and the justice system. I want to marry all that together somehow.

CS: What does the environment offer for thinking about justice?

TKS: I think it has to do with thinking about our impact on one another. We have an impact upon the earth that is analogous to the ways that we treat one another. Consuming, harnessing. These are the things we do to the planet. These are the things that institutions do to individuals. It might be scary and worthwhile to think about.