

Danez Smith at Mount Mercy

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“The poet’s main job is to witness and to dream.” No words were more aptly spoken than by Danez Smith, poet, Slam champion, author of three books of poetry, National Book Award Finalist and MMU’s visiting writer.

On Wednesday, Feb. 23, Smith led a writing workshop in the afternoon which was open to the campus and surrounding colleges. They had participants read “Introduction to Quantum Theory” by Franny Choi and “Angel Nafis” by Angel Nafis. The emphasis on the workshop was surrealism, and Smith encouraged everyone to brainstorm how to incorporate surrealism and reality into their poems, which they described as “making the cinematic eye in the writer...make the reader see what you want them to see.” For the writing prompt, they had participants pick a number between two and five, pick three years that were personally significant, and then three incidents that were globally/nationally significant. The number picked was to be the number of lines per stanza, and the challenge was to mix surrealism with personal reality based on the significant years and incidents. Usually, I stay stuck during writing prompts, so I was pleasantly surprised when I was able to churn out a whole page of poetry!

In the evening, Smith performed excerpts of their poetry to a crowd of about 40. Smith’s work covered Black and queer trauma, and while the subject matter was heavy, each poem carried a certain joyful defiance about it—even when grappling with topics such as being HIV positive. “Poems are little containers of humanness,” Smith said, “proof that we were here, we felt, we were.” Smith read 11 pieces, starting out with “My President,” which they wrote after the 2016 election when people were protesting Donald Trump’s presidency with the slogan “Not My President.” In Smith’s poem, their president(s) were the everyday people in their neighborhood and icons in Black culture—the barber down the street and Beyonce, for example. In “Summer, Somewhere,” Smith both celebrated and grieved Black boyhood, imagining a place they could live in peace. “We say our own names when we pray. /we go out for sweets and come back,” says one line, referring to teen Trayvon Martin, who went out to buy a pack of Skittles and was shot by a neighborhood vigilante who thought he looked suspicious.

One young lady in the audience asked Smith if they ever felt nervous about releasing a piece of writing that might be controversial. Smith’s answer was a quick yes, but they went on to encourage others to move against that fear.

“The purpose of releasing something isn’t agreement, but to call out the powers that be,” said Smith. “Adoration, alignment, agreement are not the only things we look for. You can’t control what people do or act toward a poem.”

One last piece of advice Smith had for aspiring writers was to “keep your eyes open and see what you can see.”