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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mother, life, grandmother, poem, inevitable, torn, secrets, slow, pitying, succeeding, webbing, alabama state university, letters, rain, soft, crane, classmates, book, day, source

00:06

I'm Tracy k Smith, and this is

00:10

a slow down.

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Just last spring, my sister

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sent me a box containing some of our mother's old belongings. One item was a 1950s autographed book from her years as an undergraduate at what is now Alabama State University. Some of the entries from classmates are fairly standard, like, I wish you indefinite success in whatever you may endeavor to do. And may Your life be as Shakespeare put it, as you like it.

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But one cuts off in the middle,

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where the page has been torn. It has been wonderful knowing you since the days of Jackson Davis Hall, especially the summer of 54. Up until 56, you have been a another page is torn

completely out. And I made to recognize that like everybody else, my mother might have had her secrets, secrets. Of course, we all have them. One of the reasons I wrote a memoir was to finally let go of the secrets I had kept from my mother when she was alive. Now that I'm a mother myself, it's hard for me to believe that anything in my life would have struck my mom as entirely foreign or surprising. Nevertheless, one effect of writing the book was that it gave me the chance to speak as if to my mother, to finally share the full truth of my own life with her. One day, when she's older, my daughter might read the book, and realize that her mother was once a young woman, making her own way in the world, succeeding at some things and failing at others. I hope one way or another, such a view of me might be a source of permission to her to grow, to fail, to hope, and to rebel. We all do these things in different ways, at different times, characterized by different circumstances, but they are necessary and inevitable parts of every life. Today's poem is heart cranes, my grandmother's love letters. It reminds me of the inevitable distances that sometimes separate us from one another. But it also beautifully celebrates the way that love can serve as a bridge across any divide. My grandmother's love letters by heart crane. There are no stars tonight, but those have memory. Yet how much room for memory there is in the loose girdle of soft rain. There is even room enough for the letters of my mother's mother, Elizabeth, that have been pressed so long into a corner of the roof, that they are brown and soft and liable to melt as snow. Over the greatness of such space, steps must be gentle. It is all hung by an invisible white hair. It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air and I asked myself Are your fingers long enough to play old keys that are but echoes? Is the silence strong enough to carry back the music to its source. And back to you again, as though to her yet, I would lead my grandmother by the hand through much of what she would not understand. And so I stumble and the rain continues on the roof with such a sound of gently pitying laughter

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