



# Life on Mars

*Tracy K. Smith*

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*You lie there kicking like a baby, waiting for God himself*

*To lift you past the rungs of your crib. What*

*Would your life say if it could talk?*

—from “No Fly Zone”

With allusions to David Bowie and interplanetary travel, *Life on Mars* imagines a soundtrack for the universe to accompany the discoveries, failures, and oddities of human existence. In these new poems, Tracy K. Smith envisions a sci-fi future sucked clean of any real dangers, contemplates the dark matter that keeps people both close and distant, and revisits the kitschy concepts like “love” and “illness” now relegated to the Museum of Obsolence. These poems reveal the realities of life lived here, on the ground, where a daughter is imprisoned in the basement by her own father, where celebrities and pop stars walk among us, and where the poet herself loses her father, one of the engineers who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope.

## Life on Mars Details

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## From Reader Review Life on Mars for online ebook

### mwpm says

The collection is divided into four parts. A poem, "The Weather in Space", precedes the first part in the form of a prelude. Indeed, the prelude poem is more closely related to the first part than to any other part...

Is God being or pure force? The wind  
Or what commands it? When our lives slow  
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls  
In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm  
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing  
After all we're certain to lose, so alive -  
Faces radiant with panic.  
- The Weather in Space (pg. 3)

The pinnacle of the first part is the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars". Called a "grand space opera" by Dana Jennings of *The New York Times*. Smith writes in the language of popular culture, incorporating trends like zombies, and throwbacks like Charlton Heston. The name of the poem itself is a reference to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick himself makes an appearance in the poem. Indeed, the poem is like a piñata of references...

We like to think of it as parallel to what we know,  
Only bigger. One man against the authorities.  
Or one man against a city of zombies....  
- My God, It's Full of Stars, 1 (pg. 8)

Charlton Heston is waiting to be let in. He asked once politely.  
A second time with force from the diaphragm. The third time,  
He did it like Moses: arms raised high, face an apocryphal white.  
- My God, It's Full of Stars, 2 (pg. 9)

In those last scenes of Kubrick's *2001*  
When Dave is whisked into the centre of space,  
Which unfurls in an aura of orgasmic light  
Before opening wide, like a jungle orchid  
For a love-struck bee, then goes liquid,  
Paint-in-water, and then gauze, wafting out and off,  
Before, finally, the night tide, luminescent  
And vague, swirls in, and on and on....  
- My God, It's Full of Stars, 4 (pg. 11)

A "God" figure is frequently referenced, as in the prelude poem, but Smith's "God" is not the god of any organized religion - at least not any "organized religion" in the traditional sense...

After dark, stars glisten like ice, and the distance they span  
Hides something elemental. Not God, exactly. More like  
Some thin-hipped glittering Bowie-being—a Starman  
Or cosmic ace hovering, swaying, aching to make us see.  
And what would we do, you and I, if we could know for sure

That someone was there squinting through the dust,  
Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only  
To be wanted back badly enough? Would you go then,  
Even for a few nights, into that other life where you  
And that first she loved, blind to the future once, and happy?

Would I put on my coat and return to the kitchen where my  
Mother and father sit waiting, dinner keeping warm on the stove?  
Bowie will never die. Nothing will come for him in his sleep  
Or charging through his veins. And he'll never grow old,  
Just like the woman you lost, who will always be dark-haired

And flush-faced, running toward an electronic screen  
That clocks the minutes, the miles left to go. Just like the life  
In which I'm forever a child looking out my window at the night sky  
Thinking one day I'll touch the world with bare hands  
Even if it burns.

- Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?, 1 (pg. 19)

It goes without saying that David Bowie is a big part of this collection. The name itself is borrowed from one of his songs, Life on Mars. (I would assume that this is common knowledge, but I don't like to make assumptions.) His presence, however, is limited to the first part...

The future isn't what it used to be. Even Bowie thirsts  
For something good and cold. Jets blink across the sky  
Like migratory souls.

- Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?, 2 (pg. 20)

The second part consists almost entirely of the long poem "The Speed of Belief". Almost, with the exception of the short poem "It's Not". Both poems appear to be related to the death of the poet's father, to whom "The Speed of Belief" is dedicated...

I didn't want to wait on my knees  
In a room made quiet by waiting.

A room where we'd listen for the rise  
Of breath, the burble in his throat.

I didn't want the orchids or the trays

Of food meant to fortify the silence,

Or to pray for him to stay or go then  
Finally toward the ecstatic light.

- *The Speed of Belief, in memoriam, Floyd William Smith 1935-2008*

That death was thinking of you or me  
Or our family, or the woman  
Our father would abandon when he died.  
Death was thinking what it owed him:  
His ride beyond the body, its garments...  
- *It's Notfor Jean*

The third part contains the titular poem, "Life on Mars". Superficially, I questioned the poet's decision. It seems to me that the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars" should have been named "Life on Mars", and "Life on Mars" should have been named... something else entirely. But I've since reconsidered my opinion. The poem needn't be about space and pop culture to be named "Life on Mars". On the contrary, the poet appears to be emphasizing the absurdity of life on Earth by referring to it as Mars. (Is the same true of Bowie's song? I can't remember the lyrics.)

Last year, there was a father in the news who kept his daughter  
Locked in a cell for decades. She lived right under his feet,  
Cooking food, watching TV. The same pipes threading through his life  
Led in and out of hers. Every year the footsteps downstairs multiplied.  
- *Life on Mars, 2 (pg. 37)*

(Smith is likely referring to the confinement of Elisabeth Fritzl by her father Josef Fritzl. After 24 years confined to her father's basement, Elisabeth escaped in 2008.)

With the poems of the fourth part, like the poems of the second part, Smith takes a more personal approach. Indeed, the poems capture an aspect of the confessional poets. Whether or not the poems are in fact based on Smith's personal life and experiences, they feel authentic, genuine, and revealing (not to say that any of the poems in any of the previous parts are in any way lacking in any of these qualities)...

There between us, while your eyes  
Danced toward mine, and my hands  
Sat working a thread in my lap.  
- "Everything That Ever Was" (pg. 59)

I am writing this so it will stay true.  
Go for a while into your life,  
But meet me come dusk  
At a bar where music sweeps out

From a jukebox choked with ragged bills.  
We'll wander back barefoot at night,  
Carrying our shoes to save them  
From the rain....

- Willed in Autumn (pg. 65)

Smith's overall use of simile and metaphor is very clever and imaginative. She describes history as having a "hard spine & dog-eared / corners" ("Sci-Fi", pg. 7). Laughter "skids across the floor / like beads yanked from some girl's throat" ("The Largeness We Can't See", pg. 18). Screaming "like the Dawn of Man" ("The Universe as Primal Scream", pg. 58). Cream dispersing "like the A-bomb" ("Life on Mars", pg. 39)....

Excellent collection! I cannot say enough good things about it!!

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### **Ellie says**

A group of poems, many overtly political, that stand on their own as poetry as well (for the most part). One particularly moving section has people who have been killed writing letters from the beyond to their murderers.

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### **Ken says**

Not wall-to-wall winners, but a damned interesting mix of styles and moods and words, all built around the theme of space and a departed dad (her father worked on the Hubble telescope). Pulitzer prize-winning poetry. Triple P. And I shared multiple poems from the text on my blah, blah, blog starting here and moving forward two or three posts, chronologically.

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### **Telaina says**

I was really torn about whether to give this three or four stars. The poems I liked I REALLY REALLY liked and these included Savior Machine, My God It's Full of Stars, Life on Mars (the title poem) and They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All He Has Rejected. But other times I would be reading one of the poems in this collection and it was almost like my eyes would slide right off of it, like there was an obliqueness there that I couldn't get through. Nothing to hang onto in some poems. Nowhere to drop my anchor as a reader. Still, I would recommend this collection for the above listed poems and her beautiful elegaic style. I'm going to put her previous book of poems on my never-ending to-read list.

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### **Whitney Atkinson says**

I wanted to love this wholeheartedly, but it straddled the line between "Oh, that's pretty!" and "What did I just read?" I forgot to mark this on Goodreads so it's been about a week since I've read it, and I honestly couldn't even give you a synopsis of what these poems were about because I think their message was a little lost on me, but I did mark several lines and poems I enjoyed, so I'm glad I picked it up.

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## Rachel (Kalanadi) says

This was good, but I am currently really bad at appreciating poetry. So, I will happily revisit this after a little poetry education regimen.

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## Miriam says

Interesting concept -- poetry about or inspired by science fiction.

Overall I found the ideas more impressive than the aesthetic qualities of the poems themselves.

*In those last scenes of Kubrick's 2001  
When Dave is whisked into the center of space,  
Which unfurls in an aurora of orgasmic light  
Before opening wide, like a jungle orchid  
For a love-struck bee, then goes liquid,  
Paint-in-water, and then gauze wafting out and off,  
Before, finally, the night tide, luminescent  
And vague, swirls in, and on and on. . . .*

*In those last scenes, as he floats  
Above Jupiter's vast canyons and seas,  
Over the lava strewn plains and mountains  
Packed in ice, that whole time, he doesn't blink.  
In his little ship, blind to what he rides, whisked  
Across the wide-screen of unparcelled time,  
Who knows what blazes through his mind?  
Is it still his life he moves through, or does  
That end at the end of what he can name?*

*On set, it's shot after shot till Kubrick is happy,  
Then the costumes go back on their racks  
And the great gleaming set goes black.*

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## Michael says

Divided into four short sections, Life on Mars roams amongst a vast range of subjects: the cultural impact of David Bowie, the serenity of late spring mornings, the death of Smith's own father, the horror of racialized killings. Smith's interest in narrative and in pop culture links the disparate poems together, though, as does her crystalline imagery. Favorite poems included "The Speed of Belief" and "Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?"

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## Lauren says

Wow. That was a beautiful collection.

My favorites:

- The Universe is a House Party
  - Museum of Obsolescence
  - Aubade
  - US & CO.
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### **John Tintera says**

I heard about this book of all places on NPR's "On Point" with Tom Ashbrook. The author was interviewed by Tom who absolutely gushed about it. Tracy K. Smith is a very good poet--she has a mystical sensibility despite her seeming adherence to a "positivism." Much of the verse centers on the recent death of her father, who was a scientist best known for his work on the Hubble Telescope. There are some very moving passages and beautiful turns of phrase, marred only here and there by the impenetrable bits. I'm thrilled that Smith is getting national media attention and I hope that her poetry circulates widely and for a long time to come.

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### **Brina says**

For 2017 I have set a goal for myself to read a minimum of twenty Pulitzer winners across all platforms. Upon hearing that Tracy K Smith had been named the United States poet laureate for the next year, I decided to read her 2012 Pulitzer winning collection Life on Mars. In poetry that is a mix of free verse, prose, letters, and songs, Smith delivers powerful words in a four part opus.

Three poems stood out in this collection. The first, The Speed of Belief, pays homage to Smith's late father. Writing in alternating couplet and paragraph form, Smith's words are so deep that I felt as though I was also mourning a loved one. She writes, "I didn't want to believe/What we believe in those rooms: That we are blessed, letting go, Letting someone, anyone;/Drag open the drapes and heave us/Back into our blinding, bright lives." Her words grow increasingly more poignant throughout this poem as Smith balances her grief with letting go of her emotions, ending with a crescendo of the dynamic between father and daughter. I could not help but shed a tear here.

Smith's title selection Life on Mars balances a plethora of emotions as she describes love, sexual violence, family dynamics, war, amongst other topics in a nine part epic. She begins with two sisters Tina and Anita as they gossip about being in love. Smith writes their section in paragraph form as she alternates between their points of view. Next she segues to describing a father's jailing of his daughter, highlighting the discrepancy between unconditional love and hatred. The poem moves to scenes in a jail and death at the hands of land mines, describing the blight of the death when people focus on hatred as opposed to love. The words here are exquisite and had me on edge, which for me as a reader does not occur too often when I read poetry; Smith's brilliancy was on full display with her centerpiece poem.

Finally, They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected pinpoints racial motivated killings during May, 2009. Using couplets alternating with letters, Smith first describes the hate crimes and who killed who. Then, she has the murder victims pen letters to their killers, including a heartfelt plea from a nine year old victim. All describe seeing landmarks for the first time and having unlimited capacity for love now that they are no longer confined to a body. The writing is raw, deep, and an overarching plea to stop the what seems like endless violence in this country. This poem alone merits awards

and is near the end of the collection in order to leave readers feeling wowed by this special work.

Tracy K Smith is deserving of her place as a poet laureate. From the small body of her work in Life on Mars, a reader only sees the tip of her exceptional work. Prior to her Pulitzer winning publication, Smith had written two other poetry collections. She has since written a memoir and has another poetry collection due out next year. If it is anything as powerful as Life on Mars, it is sure to be some of the best poetry I have written. At 5 shining stars, Tracy K Smith is one of the top authors I have read in 2017.

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### **Ifeyinwa says**

So, I'm not a big fan of poetry because it typically goes over my head. However, there are some that have recently caught my attention due to either social media or personal recommendations. I learned about Tracy K. Smith last December when a friend shared her memoir with me. Upon looking her up, I discovered that Tracy K. Smith is the US Poet Laureate (I didn't even know that was a thing!), and that she had published some poetry collections. I then decided to begin with Life On Mars, which won a Pulitzer in 2012.

When I started reading this collection, I was skeptical; but as I kept reading, and her words washed over me, I realized I was reading something special. Something brilliant. This collection draws inspiration from a variety of influences like David Bowie, Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, her late father, and more. The poems here are teeming with vivid imagery, pulsing with imagination and grounded in a sense of curiosity.

I really love this collection of poems, and highly recommend it!

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### **Antonia says**

Will have to come back to this one. I know it's been highly lauded, but . . . It didn't do it for me. Though there were a few poems I really liked. Could be me. I should come back with a more open mind.

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### **Liz Janet says**

*"Sailors fighting in the dance hall  
Oh man! Look at those cavemen go  
It's the freakiest show  
Take a look at the Lawman  
Beating up the wrong guy  
Oh man! Wonder if he'll ever know  
He's in the best selling show  
Is there life on Mars?"*  
-Life on Mars, David Bowie.

I choose that song over any of these poems any day, but that does not detract from my enjoyment of the poems presented in this collection.

*The future isn't what it used to be. Even Bowie thirsts  
For something good and cold. Jets blink across the sky*

*Like migratory souls. The future isn't what it used to be. Even Bowie thirsts  
For something good and cold. Jets blink across the sky  
Like migratory souls.*

- Don't You Wonder, Sometimes? I read this with the music of Life on Mars. It makes sense if you do it.

But she does not only refer to science and space, there is a poem in which she makes reference to the Fritzl case.

*The same pipes threading through his life  
Led in and out of hers. Every year the footsteps downstairs multiplied.*

- Life on Mars

However, sadly, most of her poems failed to resonate with me, as they seemed to make my eyes glide off of the page. I see much potential, and a not so great execution.

I will point out, that maybe in the hands of another poet, and a more centered focus on the science and Bowie aspect, rather than her occasional focus on her father, this idea for a poetry book could be done much better.

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### **James Murphy says**

Tracy Smith has written a volume of poetry touching on a favorite theme of mine, life on earth which requires one to stand and let imagination vault into the meaningless distances of outer space. Her book is ultimately about love, I think, concerned as it is with her father who famously worked as an engineer on the Hubble Telescope project. Her poetry here connects the closeness of earth with the reaches of space her father made it possible to see. In that way Smith can be thought of as life on earth yearning for what she can't reach, her departed father, or Nature beyond our solar system. She is earth-bound man looking into interstellar space for hope, her father. The poems situated on earth are darker than those about her father. Hope lies in the vast regions the Hubble can see but which man will never reach. This terrible dichotomy fills her book, the surprising partnership of faith and science, of light and darkness, and the yin/yang of existence is the matter filling Life on Mars. My favorite is called "Solstice." It's from the darker side of the book but has its own dichotomy. It's a villanelle, one of the most rhythmic, delightful poetic forms, a form so musical and pleasant that it stays with you throughout your day. But it's about killing troublesome geese at JFK. It's that kind of book.

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### **Shawn says**

This was such a unique collection. The combination of personal poetry with ruminations on Earth, space, and humanity makes for an awesome reading experience. I would definitely recommend this collection as a place to get started with poetry.

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### **Lata says**

I listened (read by the author) to this book, and there were some beautiful poems in this volume. I think I will need to read these, though, to get a better appreciation for the author's word choices and emotions.

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## **Julie Ehlers says**

This was great. My favorite was the one about Bowie ("Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?"), but I loved the set of poems about her father, and the way she kept using outer-space imagery and themes. When she was named Poet Laureate, I immediately took this out of the library and inhaled it, but I can see myself getting my own copy and rereading it someday.

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## **Eliza Barry says**

I had a really hard time with this collection. I really wanted to like it. And if it hadn't received a Pulitzer, I would not have judged it so harshly, but, because I expect quality and a respect for the macrocosm of poetry from Pulitzer-prize-winning poetry and poets, I approached this collection with high expectations. I was deeply disappointed.

Tracy Smith does have a certain innocence and wonder for life that is touching, and she asks probing questions, but her observations are too generalized. She only touches the surface of life, she never digs deeper. Pointing out the wonder of life is the beginning of a poet's job, not the entirety of it. Reveal the truth, put words to the truth. Don't be a tour guide. In *Life on Mars*, Smith is merely a tour guide, and not even an exciting one.

After all was read and done, the whole collection was a big let-down. And, I found the tie-ins to David Bowie a distasteful, almost shameful, gimmick.

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## **Roxane says**

An outstanding book of poetry. There's a real narrative quality to many of the poems and I particularly appreciated the breadth of topics Smith engages with in her poetry. Some of the strongest poems are those that deal with current events. There's a strong sense of accessibility in that...these are the kind of poems that are meant to be read and understood and appreciated. Some moments are simply breathtaking. She uses the word *gracile*, which is a lovely, lovely word. The whole collection is mighty and well worth reading, more than once.

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