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Brigham Young University

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“Life will be a brief, hollow walk”: The Future of
Humanity Through Maternal Eyes in

Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

Mallory Lynn Bingham

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Trenton L Hickman, Chair
Brian Russell Roberts
Lance Eric Larsen

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

“Life will be a brief, hollow walk”:
The Future of Humanity Through Maternal Eyes
in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

Mallory Lynn Bingham
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Tracy K. Smith’s Pulitzer Prize winning collection of poetry, *Life on Mars*, has been celebrated and analyzed as an elegy to Smith’s father by many reviewers and scholars. And while this reading is valid and has been openly endorsed by Smith herself, our understanding of this collection and Smith’s father is incomplete without Smith’s treatment of motherhood and religion, two previously unexplored fields in relation to *Life on Mars* that complete our picture of Smith’s father. Smith uses her own new role as a mother and her religious questions about the afterlife and her father’s fate to address her father’s passing.

This paper first discusses the previously hidden role of Smith’s unborn daughter Naomi, specifically hearkening to poems in the fourth section of *Life on Mars* which describe Naomi’s conception and the painful process of giving birth. This is followed by an analysis of Smith’s father *and* mother and their interconnected relationship to both Smith and her child. The third section of this paper complicates Smith’s more idyllic depictions of her family members with universal examples of violence, specifically violence towards women that can lead to unwanted motherhood like rape.

The final section of this paper takes previous discussions of motherhood, parenthood, and violence to describe Smith’s interest in the living and the dead and how the poems in *Life on Mars* tie together these disparate groups through the shared experience of loss and gain. This blurred boundary between life and death culminates in Smith’s vision of the future, a future Earth which will be incomplete and “hollow” without children, just as Smith’s past would be empty without her familial relationships. This link between the deceased and unborn makes Smith’s imagined future meaningful and invites further scholarship on *Life on Mars*, asking for scholars previously interested in only Smith’s father to include Smith’s descriptions of motherhood and religion in their analysis of Smith’s work.

Keywords: mother, father, motherhood, parents, parenthood, cosmos, outer space, Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars*, daughter, child, afterlife, future, religion, poetry, poems, violence, connection, link, family

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“Life will be a brief, hollow walk”: The Future of Humanity Through Maternal Eyes in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

Tracy K. Smith, who served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2019, is a versatile writer—her interests are many and varied, and reviewers and interviewers have drawn attention to this diversity.¹ She has written four collections of poetry, among them *Life on Mars*, her third collection, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012. Many writers have discussed Smith’s award-winning work, describing *Life on Mars* as an elegy to Smith’s father. Smith herself has acknowledged her father’s crucial role in the collection, stating that “*Life on Mars* became a way to move towards my father, to try to understand some part of the mystery of death” (Hoffman). Multiple interviewers have specifically mentioned how Smith’s *Life on Mars* examines “the future of human life, the great beyond and her father’s death” (Hoffman), tackles “matters of life and death on a grand scale” (Markham), and ponders on “one human being’s place in so massive a universe” (Markham). Experiencing the painful and pivotal loss of her father leads Smith to investigate life: our love and hate relationships to other people and universal questions of birth and death. Smith operates “through a ‘poetry of self’ as the subjects of her poems in *Life on Mars* contend with her father, daughter, metaphysical human experiences and relationships with the universe” (Pereya 56). Smith uses her poems to understand not only her father and his impact on her upbringing and later questioning of life and death, but also her daughter and Smith’s changing role from daughter to a parent herself.

Scholars and interviewers have also noted that Smith’s use of pop culture references and outer space as a backdrop and landscape for many of the poems provides a way to question the afterlife and the effect of love. Smith uses pop culture as a conduit to question how permanent death is and if there is life before birth. Her poems “fashion a metaphysical, David Bowie-

inspired futurism to evoke a sense of remembrance for her father” and respond to “vast ‘Dark Matter’ questions about human origins, religion, love and the infinite universe” (47). Smith’s poetry also discusses “dark matter” as a “feeling of sorrow and pain, for instance, as the outcome of death, birth, love and hate” (Altug 2). In both instances, “dark matter” refers to the human origin of birth, the feelings that hold people together or keep them apart, and where they go after this life.

Smith takes these same dilemmas and interests in *Life on Mars* and applies them to a more complete family picture, not only her father: a generational image, with Smith as a parent. In an interview, Smith openly talks about her new parental role in relation to *Life on Mars*:

the other thing that was happening during the time I was writing this book was I became pregnant with my daughter. And that was another big ‘it’ that, in some ways, I was really grateful for, because it gave me a sense that, not only is there this ever-after that our loved ones disappear into, but there’s some source that might be generating other people, other... loves. (Suarez)

Although readers of Smith’s work have not examined the role Smith’s daughter plays in *Life on Mars*, Smith herself makes clear that the conception and birth of her daughter is integral to her poetry collection. *Life on Mars* resonates with multiple images of birth and the arrival of Smith’s daughter, serving as a way to generate “other loves” by creating a generational line of love tying Smith to her parents who came before her and her unborn daughter. Smith expands on her daughter’s role in a collection so focused on the future and outer space when she states that “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” (Schwartz 186). In *Life on Mars*, Smith questions peoples’ often violent trajectory using specific examples of sexual

violence in section three. And although Smith treats these instances of rape and assault seriously, she depicts the future in a positive and hopeful light by focusing her poems on life and birth, expressing a desire to “mother [her] children” in such a way that “they will feel safe being children” (Smith 347). By writing about her unborn daughter, Smith allows herself to “be led” by her children and subsequently “hear and receive something that we couldn’t have come up with on our own” (Holdenraber). *Life on Mars* is successful, at least in part, because Smith is willing to listen and receive inspiration from her family, which shaped the meaning and tenor of the collection.

Smith’s poems create a more complete family picture in *Life on Mars* by not only showcasing Smith’s role as a parent, but also through Smith’s inclusion of her mother’s passing, not only her father’s. In Smith’s memoir *Ordinary Light*, Smith catalogues and explores her relationship with her mother; at the end of her memoir Smith explains, “I conceived of this book from a mother to her daughter. My luminous Naomi has been in my mind and heart throughout the writing of every line of this story” (Smith 351). Smith’s own daughter Naomi—whom *Ordinary Light* is dedicated to—plays an integral role in how Smith describes and writes about her own mother in the memoir. Smith hopes that “this book will give [her children] access to their mother and her people” (351). Whenever Smith talks about her family, her focus is the family as interconnecting parts of a greater whole, rather than as distinct and separate individuals. When Smith’s mother is dying at home, the pastor takes Smith’s father’s hand and brother’s, “starting a chain reaction that linked all of us together around her bed” (321).²

Smith writes about motherhood on the heels of two thematic genealogies: the appearance of motherhood in poetry, and the treatment of motherhood in black American writing. The history of motherhood poetry has a complicated past. Until the 1970s “poems that represented

the real, lived experiences of mothers remained hard to find” (“Poems”).³ However, in the past few decades motherhood poetry has shifted: “poets are not only writing these poems but publishers are also publishing them” (“Poems”). More people, men and women, are reading poetry about motherhood that follows “nontraditional narratives, stories that go beyond cooing over babies in themed nurseries” (Perez).⁴ Smith’s poetry includes images of motherhood, but her poems still seem cautious about placing motherhood at the center of *Life on Mars*. This isn’t surprising, because even though motherhood poetry is becoming more accepted, women poets are still anxious about making children their focus, especially “centering motherhood and making it an anchor for a collection” (Perez). This may explain why Smith doesn’t explicitly center her collection of poetry around her daughter, but instead uses related concepts—like the juxtaposition of life and death, her parents’ passing, the parental landscape of outer space, and the future of humanity—to talk about her daughter and her own role as mother.

Motherhood in black American writing adds another layer of complexity. In the past 250 years, slavery and racism have historically threatened black motherhood (Toft). Some black female writers have capitalized on the hardships of black motherhood, like Toni Morrison, who writes about black motherhood in *Beloved* as “a mark of captivity” (Osaki 25) and creates characters like Ella, who rejects “a forced motherhood” through the “sexual and economic exploitation practiced during slavery” (28).⁵ However, not every black writer focuses on the negative aspects of black motherhood. Maya Angelou during the 1970s “rose to the occasion as a new woman singing in praise of... motherhood” (Nehemiah 310). The renowned poet Lucille Clifton also focuses on motherhood in her poems, celebrating the bond to her children “that began in infancy and surpasses any other relationship” and which she “so often expressed in her work” (Carrasco). Smith’s poetry in *Life on Mars* straddles the line between motherhood poetry

and black women and motherhood. Smith also describes “forced motherhood” with several examples of sexual abuse, but she ultimately chooses to celebrate the bond to her children and motherhood in this collection.

Although thematically Smith’s poems in *Life on Mars* revolve around motherhood, the formal elements of Smith’s poetry also support such a reading. This particular book of poetry is sparse when it comes to many of the formal elements traditionally associated with poetry—rhyme scheme, meter, and rhetorical devices. Instead, Smith’s poems favor a plain style, with lines that sometimes seem more similar to prose and feature an almost entirely first-person narration. The narrator of *Life on Mars* is also unique because many of the poems in the collection relate closely to Smith’s personal life;⁶ her father’s death and passing is an aspect of her personal life in *Life on Mars* that many critics and Smith herself have been quick to note and discuss. Smith’s formal poetic choices—a more plain style and personal narrator—draw attention to the poem’s thematic concerns about the future of humanity through the eyes of motherhood. And the formal elements Smith does include, like sparse rhetorical devices, line length, and line breaks are united with her concerns about being a mother, her parents’ passing, violence that can jeopardize relationships, the connections between the dead and the living, and, ultimately, the future of humanity.

While past scholarship and reviews have mainly classified *Life on Mars* as an elegy to Smith’s father through the images of science fiction and the landscape of outer space, their understanding of the collection and Smith’s father is incomplete without Smith’s treatment of motherhood and religion, which frame Smith’s relationship with her father—her own parental role and her sincere questions about the afterlife. This paper first discusses the previously hidden role of Smith’s unborn daughter in *Life on Mars*, followed by an analysis of Smith’s mother and

father and their interconnected relationship to both Smith and her child. The third section complicates Smith's treatment of her family members with universal examples of the violence on Earth that can lead to unwanted motherhood. And while Smith's poems don't shun violence and death, they tie the dead and the living together through the shared experiences of loss and gain in section four of the paper. Smith's treatment of children, parents, violence, and the united nature of the living and dead culminate in her vision of a future Earth, an Earth incomplete and "hollow" without children, just as her past would be empty without the influence and love of her parents. This familial link between the deceased and the unborn, the dead and the living, makes Smith's imagined future rich and meaningful and invites further scholarship on *Life on Mars* in relation to both motherhood and religion, two fields that cannot be separated from scholars' current interest in Smith's father.

Smith's Unborn Child – A Passionate Sacrament

Smith's unborn daughter takes center stage in section four of *Life on Mars*, which contains the most obvious images of motherhood and birth; in fact, the second-to-last poem in the entire collection is entitled "When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me." The poems in this last section consistently describe the dual experience of pain and joy in relation to giving birth and becoming a mother. And although a few reviewers like Dana Jennings recognize Smith's homage to motherhood in the final section of her book with comments like "after the grand space opera of Part 1... Ms. Smith shows us that she can play the minor keys too. Her Martian metaphor firmly in place, she reveals unknowable terrains: birth and death and love," most critics of *Life on Mars* miss the major key of motherhood in *Life on Mars*, which is included not only in section four, but throughout the collection.

Smith's most obvious inclusion of motherhood outside of section four is the metaphor of the cosmic mother which she describes in the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars" from the first section of her collection. This cosmic mother doesn't actively intervene in her children's lives but encourages them to embrace the light rather than the darkness and uncertainty of outer space. She not only watches but bites her lip "if we teeter at some ledge. Longing / To sweep us to her breast, she hopes for the best" (Smith 8, lines 14-15). The period between "ledge" and "longing" is followed by a line break, leaving readers hanging on the word "longing" rather than "ledge." This makes the ledge seem less dangerous than the "longing," which due to the line break is ambiguous enough that it could refer to either the mother's longing, or the longing of us, her children. By leaving the source of the longing ambiguous, Smith avoids sentimentality, either by employing "the unsentimental gaze, looking at the terror of being a mother and the equal terror of being a child raised by a mother" or "by making motherhood function in a dual role—as a metaphor for artistry, or a new way into a received story" (Perez). If Smith is employing the unsentimental gaze, she leaves the source of longing ambiguous in an attempt to convey both the mother's complicated feelings before birth and the child's own feelings after being born. It doesn't matter whether Smith is describing her feelings or her daughter's: the two of them are linked so closely that the terror of birth and eventual death is a shared experience. By making the word longing independent of a speaker, Smith is also able to use motherhood to not only write poetry, but to tell a story of family and belonging, where Smith's daughter is a continuation of Smith, her father, her mother, and their collective family story. Because Smith's unborn child is a girl, Smith also recognizes that her daughter will potentially become a mother herself and face these same fears and concerns.

Smith includes other mentions of motherhood throughout *Life on Mars* in poems such as “Eggs Norwegian,” “Willed in Autumn,” and “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me,” which address motherhood in terms of conception, but the best example of Smith relating childbirth with death, or joy with pain, is the poem “Sacrament,” a clear description of the pain and “violence” inherent to birth before experiencing the joys of being a mother. The only true solution to this pain is giving voice to these feelings, although before the women are described as being able to “sing” (Smith 68, line 1) there is “a deep despairing silence” (line 2); speech coming after pain follows the cycle many women face, where “mothers, all mothers, purchase speech through pain, and if they are not speaking from the authority that pain gives them, they are not really speaking” (Bruzelius 228-29). Smith’s word choice of “song” to describe the mother’s speech rather than simply “words” supports Smith’s use of poetry, rather than prose, to give voice to motherhood throughout *Life on Mars*.

Smith, who has thought about the difference between poetry and prose, says that for her “poetry is insistent” and “allows for images and statements to operate in a single space and resonate powerfully without the application to be elaborated upon and narrated” (Rocheteau). If Smith had written about motherhood, the afterlife, and the future of humanity with prose, it would have been similar to her memoir, where her descriptions of her childhood, mother, and coming of age are extremely straightforward. She is unable to thread together questions about death and life in her memoir like she does in *Life on Mars*, where her many questions paint a complex image of the future of humanity in Smith’s mind—a future that cannot be grounded in the prose of facts, dates, and names like Smith’s past because it has yet to occur and depends on people’s choices, especially regarding their relationships to their offspring and ancestors.

The silence Smith mentions seems worse than the other descriptions of maternal pain she includes throughout the poem, like “when the pain is too much” (Smith 68, line 1), “what rocks in them” (line 3), “down to all fours begging to die” (line 7), and “down through flesh into the body’s own hell” (line 14)—all lines which make it clear that this pain only “women” (line 1) experience is painful, violent, and in some ways similar to death. “Sacrament” utilizes the rhetorical device of repetition to emphasize giving voice to motherhood through the direction “down.” Throughout the poem, Smith uses the words “deep” (line 2), “Takes them... Down” (lines 6-7), “sink deep” (line 13), “Down through flesh” (line 14), and “hell” (line 14) to demonstrate a downward descent to a kind of death or hell mentioned on line 14. However, the last line of the poem ends on an upward note, as the women’s voices climb “back up into air as if to burst the throat” (line 16), even if “it takes forever” (line 15). The only thing that can redeem these women from the death of labor and childbirth is their song, a song Smith sings in *Life on Mars* as she addresses motherhood through the lyric of poetry. She gives voice to the pain and violence so often coupled with human connection and love by comparing birth with death.

Smith clearly understands that this pain comes coupled with birth (Smith had already given birth to her first child in 2008 before *Life on Mars* was released in 2011), and Smith intentionally puts the poem “Sacrament” with its harsh reality of childbirth right before “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me,” the poem where she describes deciding to get pregnant with her daughter. In the printed copy of Smith’s book, the two poems face each other like mirrors, making Smith’s message clear not only in content, but also in form and poetic organization. The joys of conception are overlaid with the pains of birth, and by placing the violence of birth before the moment of conception Smith makes it impossible for her readers to ignore the complicated process of motherhood.

The second-to-last poem in Smith's collection, "When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me" is specifically written to her unborn daughter, who watches the couple, "wanting to be / What we passed back and forth between us like fire" (69, lines 8-9). The daughter's presence at her conception isn't surprising given the closeness of Smith's father even in death. The climax of "The Speed of Belief," Smith's elegy to her father, consists of an assumption and a question. If Smith's father is "bound / By habit or will be to one of us / Again" (33, lines 104-06), will he "break back into the world / Through [her]" (lines 107-08)? Smith makes the life before and after this one not only accessible, but ever-present and overlapping. Smith even asks where her daughter was before birth: "From what dream of world did you wriggle free?" (line 12).⁷ She follows this question by a mention of her child finally being conceived, a moment the collection has been building towards since its opening poem "The Weather In Space," "When our lives slow / And we can hold all that we love" (3, lines 2-3). After deliberating her role as a mother, her own parents and family connections, and the violent world the child will be born into, Smith makes the choice she informed her readers of at the beginning of *Life on Mars*—to choose love in the form of childbirth rather than fear or hatred, even if that love is painful.

She asks her unborn child, "What soared—and what grieved—when you aimed your will / At the yes of my body alive like that on the sheets?" (69, lines 13-14). In this final question Smith recognizes that her child is somewhat aware of the joys and pains awaiting her on Earth, embodied in the juxtaposition of "soaring" and "grieving." Even though her daughter doesn't recognize the complicated aspects of living on Earth, Smith describes her unborn baby as "Wanting weight, desiring desire, dying / To descend into flesh, fault, the brief ecstasy of being" (lines 10-11). In a poem without other instances of alliteration, Smith's overemphasized use of alliteration in these two lines with "wanting weight," "desiring desire, dying / To descend,"

“flesh, fault” and “brief... being” capitalizes on the essential nature of this particular line in the poem. The line break between “dying” and “To descend” places heavy emphasis on death, where Smith’s choice of line break seems to make death a process in the cycle of being born. Yes, “dying to” do something is a phrase used to depict wanting to do something badly, but because of where Smith breaks her poetic line we as readers are faced with two options: either the daughter experiences some kind of death or loss inherent in coming to earth, or she strongly desires to experience mortal life. Because in the previous poem “The Speed of Belief” Smith describes her parents’ passing as returning to “blinding, bright lives” (27, line 14), it makes sense that for Smith’s daughter to be born she would have to leave some kind of alternative life to come to Earth. This “death” of sorts is welcome, because even with the loss, Smith’s daughter is “dying to” come experience Earth life and the “brief ecstasy of being.” Her daughter can simultaneously experience loss and gain by being born, because of how closely-knit life and death are in Smith’s poetry and mind.

Interconnected Lives – Smith’s Parents and Unborn Daughter

Smith better understands where her daughter is before being born as she asks important questions about the interconnected nature of parents and children. “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?” picks up where “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me” left off, asking questions like “nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only / To be wanted back badly enough?” (19, lines 7-8) and “how many lives / Before take-off, before we find ourselves / Beyond ourselves?” (20, lines 27-29). Smith’s second question is full of repetition: she repeats the word “before,” drawing attention to not only the timing but also the location of her question, and the word “ourselves,” or who is implicated. The poem’s repeated usage of “before” paints an image of the “beforelife” Smith’s daughter lives in before coming down to earth, while the

repetition of “ourselves” shows a blending together of the poem’s narrator, the dead, and the living.

Even though Smith asks if nothing is lost, she clearly still mourns the loss of her father, stating in an interview that she realized “that being ‘out there’ helped in articulating the questions and anxieties that came as a result of grief... It all came together in an eerily frightening way” (Tomassi). In this case, Smith’s grief acts as a catalyst for answers to other questions and anxieties related to losing her father—and questions of her family as a larger whole. Where is her family that have already passed on, like her father and mother? Is she still connected to them after death? If deceased loved ones and children yet to be born are wanted back badly enough, will any of us truly experience loss? Smith is capable of both mourning her father’s loss and maintaining a hope and belief that her relationship with him has not been lost through death, only transformed. Even though Smith can’t bring her father back, her memories and poems give her father a new life beyond the grave—he is clothed in the additional role of an uplifting example for Smith’s children. Smith’s father does “break back into the world” (Smith 33, line 107) through Smith: through her poetry and the stories about her father she shares with others, like her living family members and children.

Smith cements her role as the spokesperson of old and new life by addressing parenthood through the landscape of her father: outer space. Smith describes outer space through the metaphor of motherhood when she says: “Some like to imagine / A cosmic mother watching through a spray of stars, / Mouthing *yes, yes* as we toddle toward the light” (8, lines 11-13). If the cosmos is a mother, the stars and other planets are her offspring. In this poem outer space, “offered as a new possibility for an existence, is defined with feminine attributions, just like a

great maternal body” (Altug 6). This kind of mother isn’t only parent to a couple of children, but to a multitude of stars.⁸

By invoking a multitude of familial “stars,” Smith summons those who have come before her and those who will come after—truly a cosmic gathering of family, similar to the many interconnected lives Smith recognizes are tied to her mother after her mother’s passing. Smith asks, “how many more lives would we find, if we only knew how to seek them, within the life we recognized as hers?” (Smith 325). Once Smith’s mother has passed on and entered the afterlife, Smith opens her eyes to the interconnected nature of humanity. She realizes not only her ties to her mother, but also her mother’s ties to loved ones and family, ties that transcend death and become visible and pronounced. By facing the supposed boundary of death and choosing to see her mother as a person who is still living, but in a place distinct from earth, Smith’s vision isn’t clouded by grief and loss.

Smith mentions multiple, interconnected lives in the poem “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?” with the phrase “how many lives” (Smith 20, line 27) in conjunction with us finding our identities. For Smith, this identity is found after “take-off” (line 28), after shooting into the cosmos to explore the unknown, both in outer space and ourselves—outer space is designated as a landscape where “we find ourselves / Beyond ourselves” (lines 28-29). Smith’s word choice, using the words “we” and “ourselves” rather than “me” and “myself,” demonstrates that we don’t find ourselves individually, but collectively as a group. Smith dives into this concept heavily in *Ordinary Light* after the death of her mother, where she finds herself asking at her mother’s burial “*Is she with us now, or has she already gone? And if she goes, can she ever come back?*” (Smith 324). Questioning where her mother has gone and if her mother is still with the family even beyond the grave leads to Smith imploring that angels “give a piece of my

mother back, to show me that she was still available to me—not locked in the past tense, but rather eternal and ongoing” (344).

She also explains, when interviewed about her memoir, that she was searching for not only her “mother and whatever answers she could provide to the questions I never learned to ask” but also “for a glimpse of the person I could have been alongside her” (Lozada). Continuing her prior theme, Smith demonstrates that the familial chain is essential to self-discovery and progress because her vision of the future is incomplete without other people and lives, a place where we can “[bump] up against a herd of bodies until one becomes home” (Smith 70, 5-6). Smith asks if her mother is still with her, giving the impression that death isn’t the permanent and uncrossable divide that many describe it as. If the dead stay beside the living, Smith’s future “herd of bodies” expands substantially, where each individual person embodies the many people who came before them, making those people “eternal and ongoing” (Smith 344). *Life on Mars*, far from only describing the narrow experience of Smith and her deceased father, reaches into the expansive territory of countless daughters, fathers, and other relationships, an observation current conversation has ignored.

Life on Mars is more robust than interviewers and scholars have described it. It doesn’t just do the work of celebrating Smith’s father’s life and role in her upbringing, but also bluntly questions our previous understanding of death and our daily interactions as people. In Smith’s narrative, her daily interactions expand to include not only her husband, children, and other living relatives and friends—her mother and father accompany her from day to day, not only impacting her present choices, but her future path. If no one really dies and is only waiting “to be wanted back badly enough” (Smith 19, line 8), *Life on Mars* invites its readers to want people

back badly enough to form familial connections of their own with their deceased loved ones, making the future of humanity full and rich rather than brief and hollow.

“The Space Between People” – Violent Relationships and Motherhood

Life on Mars, while depicting a hopeful take on humanity’s future through the previous discussion of Smith’s role as a mother and her parents’ role in shaping her, also tackles the potential violence of motherhood and family—rape and abuse. Although as a child Smith was afraid to address the hard and difficult questions, she states in her memoir that “silence feeds pain, allows it to fester and thrive. What starves pain, what forces it to release its grip, is speech” (Smith 278). Smith breaks the silence her younger self clung to in the third section of *Life on Mars*, where she claims “the power to name and state and face the events, even the most awful events, making up a life” (Smith 279). By naming these events, she takes generic concepts of violence and subjugation and clothes them in specific human bodies and examples. This action takes the violence done to women in her poems from fiction to reality—something people are currently facing and a real fear for humanity’s future.

Smith’s willingness to break the silence leads into a lengthy catalog of extreme suffering and abuse in section three of *Life on Mars*, where the more positive depictions of her role as a mother, her children, and her parents are complicated by the multiple kinds of violence that disrupt and destroy human relationships. Smith explains that even when she writes poems about motherhood or love, she feels “unresolved” if the poem “doesn’t have something under the surface that’s dangerous” (DiPerna). Once again, Smith uses poetry specifically to face the darker side of human nature, explaining that “rather than solving, sidestepping or denying problems, poems bear witness to dark facets of experience, they give us vocabulary for the terror, the shame, the regret” (“Tracy”). All the violence Smith illustrates can fall under her description

of “the space between people / When what holds them together isn’t exactly love” (Smith 37, lines 1-2). This space between people, especially men and women, leads to violence and hatred—the opposite of love.⁹ Smith describes many cases of human suffering in section three of her collection, but most of these are also related to motherhood: children, sex, or rape.

This section of *Life on Mars* is the most heavily critiqued, with critics like Joel Brouwer claiming that this section of poems is unnecessary and destroys the cohesion of other sections because Smith supposedly “provides no meaningful reasons they should be considered jointly.”¹⁰ Brouwer goes on to say that “Smith’s desire to write about injustice is commendable, but her approach can be haphazard,” especially if Smith’s only goal for this collection was to celebrate the life of her father. But if Smith’s aim is to address the future of humanity through the eyes of motherhood, then this section on violence is essential to Smith’s book, each section building on the others to create a panorama of motherhood and familial bonds. *Life on Mars* is much more than a beautiful, breezy cosmic elegy to a beloved father. It broadens the conversation from dealing with grief over the loss of one person to an imagined future of humanity without these family connections, a future which Smith describes as “brief,” “hollow,” and essentially pointless (Smith 29, line 46).

In an interview in which Smith was specifically asked about Brouwer’s comment, she responds, “in those larger poems that are concerned with news events and the idea of injustice, what he interprets as haphazard is something I see as expansive” (Markham). She continues, “the poems are seeking to parse an array of events and to ask: ‘What questions or urges emerge as the result of considering these events together?’” (Markham). Smith pushes her current fears about motherhood into the future through these various violent events, expanding from a simple

mother-daughter relationship to the future consequences of such injustice against people and the family unit.

Smith grapples with one particularly disturbing instance of human violence, the Fritzl case, uncovered in 2008, in which Elisabeth Fritzl was repeatedly assaulted, sexually abused, and raped by her father for 24 years— “The same pipes threading through his life / Led in and out of hers. Every year the footsteps downstairs multiplied” (Smith 37, lines 18-19). This severe abuse and violence lead to childbirth, a horrible nightmare with “Babies wailing through the night” and “Kids screaming to be let outside” (line 20). This poem, the second section of the long poem “Life on Mars,” is a clever mix of poetic elements that Smith breaks. At first glance this section of the poem follows iambic pentameter for the most part, especially lines like “Then turned away. They cursed him to his back. He didn’t hear” (38, line 24). However, even this line has too many syllables to follow iambic pentameter, and other lines initially follow this meter only to break it. For example, the line “Lying down with the daughter, who had no choice. Like a god” (line 22) doesn’t start out iambic but becomes perfectly iambic at “who had no choice.” This poetic element showcases Smith’s meaning and argument—Elisabeth’s father lying with her is unnatural and doesn’t follow normal guidelines or norms. However, Elisabeth’s lack of choice, ironically and tellingly, does follow iambic meter, emphasizing Elisabeth’s captivity—even Smith’s lines are imprisoned in a strict poetic form as she describes Elisabeth’s fate.

Smith also blends blunt images like “lying down with the daughter” (line 22), “locked in a cell for decades” (line 17), and “how close that room. What heat” (line 26) with poetic images like “The same pipes threading through his life / Led in and out of hers” (lines 18-19). Similar to Smith’s use of meter, her imagery also breaks the poetic mold, blending the formal poetic elements with phrases that sound more like prose or headlines taken from a newspaper. This

jumble of formal elements and stark fact performs violence on Smith's poems—poetic form matching poetic meaning.

Living in a world capable of this kind of violence and terror weighs heavily on readers, especially a mother-to-be who worries not only for herself, but for a child as well. This is a case about motherhood, even though the emphasis is on the father's many heinous crimes and the daughter's victimhood and suffering. Jennifer Militello explains that poets are able to write about motherhood "by calling attention to and exaggerating the objectification traditionally inflicted on women" (36). Smith reclaims Elisabeth Fritzl by emphasizing her horrific role as object to her father. In this example, Smith describes the sometimes-unwanted role and burden of motherhood, especially in cases of rape. This violence only amplifies the trials a new mother undergoes to bring new life into the world, and what hope is there for children in a world where their mother has been subjugated to the unwanted sexual attention of her own father? Facing her childhood fear of speaking out against violence, Smith asks "the hard questions, the ones that [pry] into the space where certainty [gives] way" (Smith 296). Once again, Smith seeks answers to questions we've only begun to answer. By projecting herself into the future and the consequences of such violence, Smith intercepts the increased horrors of the future if people continue to ignore the hard questions and realities of violence and hide under a false sense of certainty.

Smith's attention to rape continues in section 5 of the long poem "Life on Mars," where a woman describes being raped with short, descriptive phrases: "*Wind, dirt, his hands / Hard on me*" (Smith 38, lines 40-41) with the promise of future sexual violence as "*others / Jostl[ed] to watch as they waited / For their turns*" (lines 41-43). The woman Smith describes is faceless and nameless, a placeholder for the sexual violence inflicted on women of all races and time periods.

By keeping the woman and her location vague, Smith makes the violent episode universal, a foil for the individual and personal like Elizabeth Fritzl. The nameless woman could easily stand in for a future rape and future violence in a future world. Breaking away from a well-documented event unearthed in 2008 to a hazy example of similar violence allows Smith to break away from the current time period into the past and a potential future, a move she makes earlier in *Life on Mars* when she describes outer space with a mix of different images: twentieth-century science fiction references and quotidian, current objects like panties and lipstick.

Even though Smith sifts through multiple examples of extreme violence and rightfully feels “sheer fright” (42, line 107), she ultimately realizes that “The worst thing you can imagine has already / Zipped up its coat and is heading back / Up the road to wherever it came from” (44, lines 14-16). Although Smith could have included countless other examples and stories of violence throughout the planet’s geography and time, she hand picks a few specific examples to make her point: living on Earth is not without its risks and threats of the worst kind of relationships, regardless of age, gender, etc. Both Smith and her unborn daughter, as well as anyone else interacting with other people, are in danger of “the space between people.” But by including these news clippings Smith grounds her more metaphorical imaginings of the future through the lens of outer space with earthy, shocking accounts that are well documented and already a part of the world’s history.

The Dead and the Living – Cosmically United

Much of *Life on Mars* takes place in outer space, an infinite and conceptual landscape Smith juxtaposes with the finite nature of death and the specific loss of her parents. Smith’s collection gains cohesion across sections as she combines the infinite with the finite, and that combination is Smith’s family and her relationship to them.¹¹ The infinite and finite are

specifically found in the familial relationship of motherhood, which “feels like it happens between things, between finite beginnings and endings” (Dasbach). Considering her own finite beginning as a parent, Smith explains the finite ending of both her parents when she says, “losing my father made me want to find out if I could come up with a version of God or the afterlife that I could feel like was acceptable now that both my parents are in it” (Rocheteau). Smith’s poems in *Life on Mars* use outer space as a physical representation of death, taking something infinite and conceptual and clothing it in something finite and physical. Outer space, because we don’t know the boundaries or complete contents, is “infinite” in human terms and also more of a concept than a physical reality: people are unable to currently live in outer space, and only a few trained specialists are able to travel there. However, death is finite in the sense of representing a definitive ending—the moment a person stops breathing. Death is also something painfully physical. Those left to mourn the person’s passing are left with a physical body and the deceased’s physical belongings. By comparing the two, Smith is questioning the finite nature of death: do we really know the boundaries of death or where the deceased goes post-life? She is also bringing outer space, an inaccessible location to most, down to earth, mingling the cosmic with the earthy, including human possessions and bodies.

This collection reaches into the expansive territory of death by breaking the clean boundaries between the living and the dead. Smith writes about her father as though he is still alive and simply in another location that Smith is unable to visit, like outer space. The first couple lines of “The Speed of Belief” discuss the origins of both life and death, or the afterlife:

That we are blessed, letting go,
 Letting someone, anyone,
 Drag open the drapes and heave us

Back into our blinding, bright lives. (Smith 27, lines 11-14)

Smith doesn't let go of her father, but rather her illusion of control. Her poetry doesn't try to demand her father return or erase the terrible pain of his passing, but it does "let go" of traditional beliefs regarding death. The form of "The Speed of Belief" follows the content—the poem starts out uniformly, more so than almost any other poem in the collection. The first fourteen lines of the poem fit on the same page, making these lines seem like their own poem even though the entire poem stretches on seven total pages. At first the form is reminiscent of an informal sonnet with unrhyming couplets; the first three couplets have identical line lengths, the first line of each couplet consisting of eight words and the second line consisting of seven. This form gives the perception of control, but this tight form quickly breaks apart as Smith herself begins to let go of her form and her father. The shortest line of this page of "The Speed of Belief" is "Letting someone, anyone," which is the turning point from despair and loss to hope that death is less of a destination and more of a transitory moment between Earth and the next world: the afterlife.

Death in "The Speed of Belief" is described as being heaved "back into our blinding, bright lives," making death more comparable to passing through a doorway into another room than a dead end where life and existence as we understand it end. The line break between "us" and "Back" emphasizes the word "back" and the concept of returning somewhere, rather than going somewhere for the first time, which is how we normally talk about the process of death. Her concept of the "afterlife" is a place her parents have already been before dying, implying that Smith's parents were either in this "afterlife" before being born, or that the place of death is somehow the same as the place of life.

Smith addresses this discrepancy of returning to life through death by blurring the boundaries between the two. In this “afterlife” of sorts people are described as united: “our” lives (line 14). This departure from life to death sounds parallel to birth, where babies let go of their previous home, which although perhaps frightening, leads to the blessing of birth and a new bright life.¹² Smith openly admits to this familial connection when she talks about her mother’s family as “men and women were people I carried inside me, too, even if I couldn’t yet recognize them” (Smith 15). Carrying family members inside of her is another way of saying that Smith feels linked to her family and doesn’t give credence to the commonly accepted belief that death and life cannot coexist. Smith is able to write about her father and her unborn daughter in the same collection of poetry with the same passion and emotion because in Smith’s imagined future her poetry describes death as synonymous with outer space—those who have died are far away and in a place different from Earth, but can still be communicated with and potentially visited.

Although Smith ties outer space with death, the cosmos is also a site for birth and new life. The cover of *Life on Mars* is an image of “the Cone Nebula, a pillar of dust and gas some 2,500 light-years from Earth” (Brouwer), and, speaking of the book cover, Brouwer makes a seemingly-offhand comment that unwittingly showcases the heart of Smith’s poems: “Scientists say [the Cone Nebula is] an incubator for baby stars.” Smith mentions in *Ordinary Light* how her father related outer space with concepts like birth and parenthood: “they were contributing to... a machine [the Hubble Telescope] that would tell us how the universe itself was born. An unbounded hope, like that of a child, broke into his voice at the word *born*” (Smith 141).¹³ Smith’s own father was looking for answers into the birth of the universe. In Smith’s poetry both birth and death can coexist within the metaphor of outer space because both represent a resting place separate and distinct from Earth but also in communication with it.

Throughout *Life on Mars* Smith freely connects the dead with the unborn, as though the cosmos is “choc-full of traffic, / Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel / Nor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding” (Smith 10, lines 49-51). Smith’s imagery in section three of “My God, It’s Full of Stars” is grand and galactic, notably different from the imagery that populates most of *Life on Mars*. When describing outer space and future life in other sections of the same poem, Smith uses phrases that center around Earthly images like “red ants / Let loose down the pants of America” (8, lines 5-6) or “a library in a rural community” (line 19). The images in the third section break away from the mundane and quotidian to cosmic phrases like “bursting at the seams with energy” (10, line 50), “the great black distance they—we— flicker in” (line 56), and “the high beams of a million galaxies” (line 58).

This grandiose, bigger-than-life imagery provides a solid foundation for Smith’s bigger-than-life questions about the living and dead which populate the outer space of Smith’s poetry—the generations: those who have come before us and those who will live on after we ourselves have died.¹⁴ This interlinked understanding of birth and death is unique because most people celebrate birth and fear death, considering birth as a site of gain and death as a site of loss. But Smith’s poetry continually puts into question this common understanding of birth and death. Birth becomes more than a simple celebration of brand-new life: it becomes a more solemn time of pondering, in which Smith wonders if her deceased family have been in contact with or are an integral part of her new baby.

Death is complicated from a moment of straight grief to a chance to connect with the divine, both in those who have passed on and in herself. Smith explains these complicated feelings as she looks at her daughter: “I wonder if gazing into each newborn face—at each little being who seemed at once ancient and utterly new... had put my mother (as it did me) in search

of anything that would permit her, quite simply to last” (Smith 346). For Smith, “lasting” refers to maintaining a mother-daughter connection past the grave: “*Dear God, please let me keep her in my life even after I no longer have a life. Please let me always, always be her mother*” (346). Smith’s ponderings on her newborn child and deceased mother are interconnected—she is unable to look at her new baby without also seeing her mother, with Smith in the middle as a link between the two women. Smith’s future—her new child—is colored and shaped by her past—her mother. By blending birth and death, or the future and the past together, Smith makes the present a blending of those who came before and those who will come after, fashioning a future for humanity that speaks of hope. Regardless of what Smith’s daughter will face, she will encounter the future with both her mother and grandmother at her side, even after her mother passes. The concept of family in Smith’s imagined future is much more expansive than a single person living and breathing and interacting with others—Smith’s daughter will be a microcosmic cosmos, embodying the family members who have already left earth.

A Brief and Hollow Life – The Future of Humanity Without Children

When all four of Smith’s sections are brought together in terms of content and poetic form, *Life on Mars* becomes a “beautiful kind of cyclical thing” where Smith’s love for her daughter—and in extension her family—takes center stage. Each section builds upon each other in a cyclical pattern as though the beginning of *Life on Mars* is also the ending, creating the complicated layers of Smith’s contemplations on life, birth, and parenthood, especially in light of her own father’s role and passing. Aware of Earth’s awaiting violence, Smith often couples life with death, making the afterlife an accessible location where Smith can continue to interact with her parents and maintain a connection with her daughter even after she herself has passed away. *Life on Mars* is a collection of poems that “activate and affirm our sense of being individuals, of

having feelings, of having been affected powerfully by the events and people that touch us” (Orbison). The poems in *Life on Mars* not only solidify Smith’s own sense of self, but also put her in orbit with the “people that touch us.” These people include her deceased parents, but the real accomplishment of this collection of poetry is to expand beyond the boundaries of one person’s death and one person’s grief to warn readers about a future without family connections. Smith uses the concept of motherhood to broaden the conversation beyond her father’s passing to the universal concern of the future of humanity—what kind of world will future generations live in? And *Life on Mars* answers this question: if people do not maintain a connection to those who came before them and have children and family to “carry out names,” life will be nothing more than “a brief, hollow walk” (Smith 29, line 46).

“The Speed of Belief” describes the future of humanity without children (and by extension a future without family connections) in lines 45 and 46: “Perhaps one day it will be enough to live a few seasons and return to ash. / No children to carry out names. No grief. Life will be a brief, hollow walk.” Smith includes the comment “no grief” directly after “no children.” If she stopped there, it would seem that Smith considers childbirth and parenthood as painful or unhappy occurrences. But her closing statement of “Life will be a brief, hollow walk” makes it clear that life is only really worth living, pain and all, in families, beginning with childhood and ending with raising children. This familial connection—children to parents and parents to children—makes life more than a “brief” and “hollow” experience. Smith already addresses her relationship to her own parents freely throughout *Life on Mars*, but she also uses the specific example of her unborn daughter to catalog the “parent to child” connection as well.

It is around this family circle, generational and continual in scope and focus, that Smith centers her collection of poetry. Although her father is named and highlighted more than any of

Smith's other family in *Life on Mars*, she continually links his life and passing to other lives and loves, both named and unnamed. These other loves are people like her mother (who passed away before Smith's father), her husband, her unborn daughter, and the unnamed generations that have come before Smith and will come after her. And just as Smith is willing to face the violence she shunned as a little girl, through this collection of poetry she writes poems "that devise means to contemplate those others and take in their perspectives," "rather than putting up a buffer between ourselves and those outside our immediate sphere" ("Tracy"). Smith's poetry takes down the boundary people fear most—death.

While she does address other boundaries like slavery in *Wade in the Water* where she "juxtaposes the joy and freedom of watching her daughter flourish with the harrowing, untold tales of slaves who enlisted as soldiers in the Civil War" (Lewis), the focus of her poems in *Life on Mars* is removing the buffer between the living and the dead. By breaking down the barrier between life and death through the overarching theme of motherhood, Smith is asking, "What do we do to one another? Why? What is the effect?" ("Professor"). Smith uses the specific example of her daughter to illustrate a relationship that breaks down the boundaries of life and death—even before Smith's daughter is born Smith questions how cognizant her daughter is and how her father impacts or relates to her baby. This example expands through Smith's discussion of worldwide violence and the cosmos to discuss the future of humanity: both her fears of continued violence if people continue to embrace and expand the "space between them" and her hopes and confidence in "a future with opportunities" (Ranft 76-77) if people embrace the interconnected nature of being human and are brave enough to have children and nourish other family relationships, even beyond the grave.

Because Smith is intent on addressing the future of humanity, her former role as Poet Laureate of the United States logically comes into play. If Smith's vision of the future is dependent on people having children and becoming parents like her and her spouse, it makes sense that one of Smith's goals for the United States and her poetry would be to remove as many divisions between people as possible.¹⁵ Smith mentions wanting "to test out an idea that I had that poetry is good at bridging different kinds of divides, because we've lived in a culture where for the last couple years, we've been talking a lot about division" (Dolin). In a country focused on division and how "Americans of different backgrounds cannot relate to each other" (Dolin), an entire award-winning collection of poetry focused on the unity of Smith to her father, mother, and daughter seems intent on addressing these divisions head-on and overcoming them through the power of poems, which "remind us of what we share as well [as] the validity of our differences" (Syau). *Life on Mars* does not attempt to cover every division or "space" between other people—its focus is more specific. People need to embrace their connections to their deceased family members and their offspring, even if those relationships are colored with grief or loss. Smith understands that love is "coupled with a sense of threat, and yet, if we're willing to be larger than the fear that that incites, something great could happen" (Tippett).

Ultimately, the "great" thing *Life on Mars* accomplishes is expanding scholarship surrounding these poems from discussions about Smith's father's death to other fields and disciplines. By addressing the role of mothers and children, *Life on Mars* is more than an elegy—it also branches into the flourishing field of motherhood poetry and black women in relation to motherhood. Scholars and interviewers of this collection of poems won't really grasp Smith's concerns about her father's passing if they are ignorant of the interconnected life event happening alongside his death: Smith's daughter's birth. Scholars of motherhood poetry and

black women writing about motherhood who haven't studied Smith's poetry previously should take this paper as an invitation to examine Smith's other collections of poetry, not only *Life on Mars*, which also grapple with motherhood.¹⁶

Life on Mars is also a celebration of new life occurring in tandem with the elegiac event of death, which opens up the collection to another discipline—religion. Although Smith wouldn't classify herself as someone as religious as her mother, for example, her focus on the afterlife and the interconnected nature of life and death, as well as the familial link between the living and the dead, can only fit under the expansive umbrella of religion.¹⁷ Scholars and interviewers have spent little time discussing Smith's religious views, and even less time analyzing *Life on Mars* with attention to the religious aspects and questions it brings up. Almost every religion addresses life after death, or a kind of "afterlife"; Smith's poetry is intensely interested in where people go after death and where they are before being born, something religions have spent centuries teaching and grappling with. Further scholarship on both motherhood in Smith's poetry and the role religion plays in her work will make the image of the future of humanity clearer—a future where the dead intermingle freely with the living, "flush against us, living, dying, deciding" (Smith 10, line 51).

Notes

¹ A few key topics Smith's work covers include the quotidian or "fleeting associations [that] make up a life" (Anderson), her desires to help everyone understand poetry and its relevance in their lives (Alter), "painstaking reflections on what went into the making of her" (Pinckney), her understanding of death (especially her father's) and her subsequent "way of expressing hope" (Brouwer), and the power of poetry as a "rehumanizing force" (Franklin).

² However, just because Smith is able to openly talk about her mother's life and passing in *Ordinary Light* does not mean that she has always considered herself capable of addressing her mother's death. While attending graduate school, Smith's thesis consisted of "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'" (Schwartz 181). During this time, one of Smith's teachers, Alice Quinn, said to her: "'You're writing about your mother's death, but every one of your poems is trying to line things up neatly... Maybe it shouldn't be that way.' She said, 'Maybe it's too soon to be writing about this'" (182). At the time Smith revolted against Quinn's words, but now admits, "I think she was right. I needed time in order to approach the material with a lighter hand" (182). That "lighter hand" is present in the poems that constitute *Life on Mars*, where Smith doesn't attempt to "line things up neatly" or make it heavy-handed (or even obvious) that she's not only writing about the impact of her father's passing, but her mother's as well.

³ Instead, prior to the 1970s, mothers in poetry were depicted as "'mythic mothers, mother goddesses, and nurturing muses'" ("Poems"). Even the famous American poet and writer Sylvia Plath was accused of writing motherhood poetry that was "alternately described as sentimental, ambivalent, weak, and violent" (Souffrant 28).

⁴ More and more poets, like Ada Limón, who won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, and Toi Derricotte, who won the Paterson Poetry Prize, embrace rather than hide their experiences as mothers, with “mother-poets of the current generation... moving motherhood out of the household and considering it one of many intersectional identities” (Perez). Rather than their identity being solely focused on motherhood, these poets are combining their parental identity with their personal, social, and professional spheres.

⁵ The author Zora Neale Hurston also writes about black motherhood in this light, where her protagonist Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is married, but she doesn't have any children (none are mentioned in the text). This gives the impression that Hurston herself may have viewed black motherhood as restrictive, preventing Janie from reaching freedom. The poet Angelina Weld Grimke also focuses on the difficulty of being a black mother in a white world—in her play *Rachel* the protagonist Rachel is against black children being brought into a world where racism abounds.

⁶ Smith herself explains that when she writes about her personal life in her poems, by the time the “work is presentable, the anxieties about truth and content—about [her] own vulnerability as a private person—are greatly diminished” (Kaudon) and that she finds “writing a poem leads [her] to think allusively, associatively, to seek out connections between [her] own experience and seemingly disparate features of the outside world” (Orbison).

⁷ In Smith's book of poetry *Duende*, she imagines herself before birth, similar to her treatment here of her daughter. By questioning her own existence before birth, Smith is trying to

understand her present self and the self she “may become” (Als). Even before Smith is a mother herself, she demonstrates an interest “in the roots of love, the various selves that go into the making of a body,” including the “threats to the female body” (Als). She elaborates on these multiple selves in *Life on Mars*, as well as the sexual violence women in particular face through rape or abuse.

⁸ This kind of mother isn’t only parent to a couple of children, but to a multitude of stars so vast that it invokes the phrase “My God” when people on Earth glimpse her posterity. This description of cosmic motherhood is actually the title of the poem: “My God, It’s Full of Stars.”

⁹ Smith’s sister Tina, who first introduces this space between people, describes the opposite of love this way: “When it’s not [love], / We’re riddled with bullets, shot through like ducks” (41, lines 102-03).

¹⁰ Another reviewer points out the possible discrepancies between Smith’s different sections: “readers may find *Life on Mars* to be uneven in certain ways. The kind of emotion-provoking machinery that drives “The Speed of Belief” does not maintain its intensity throughout the book, even in “They May Love...” (Hagood).

¹¹ When asked specifically about the creation of *Life on Mars*, Smith explains: “I didn’t think that I was setting out to write a book about God and about death and about the finite nature of our lives, but those are the questions that were really on the surface for me” (Suarez).

¹² Smith refers to these multiple lives when describing her childhood in *Ordinary Light*, where she asks herself: “How many was I? How many were here for good, and how many were merely passing through?” (Smith 155). Although Smith could be referring to the multiple lives of one person, as she does in her memoir, in “The Speed of Belief” she is referring to the multiple lives interconnected to each other, like how her parents and children are inseparably connected to her, a phenomenon where “as humans, we continually strive to connect and find security and comfort with loved ones. Smith nods to nature’s cycle” (Pereya 59-60). Nature’s cycle in this case refers to seeking connections with the people around us, especially loved ones and family members.

¹³ Smith also connects the images taken with the Hubble Telescope with metaphor, saying that the images were “so abstract that they automatically engender[ed] metaphors” and that “because [she] was trying to rein in something that seemed so alien, so remote, the images that became useful to [her] were very earthbound” (Orbison). Some of Smith’s most powerful earthbound images are of conception and childbirth: she describes the conception of her unborn daughter in “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me” and the painful process of giving birth in the previous poem, “Sacrament,” and these poems make physical and earthbound the “alien” concepts of death and the afterlife, essential concerns Smith confronts in *Life on Mars*.

¹⁴ Even describing an obvious moment of celebration and new life—bringing home her newborn daughter—Smith can’t help but relate with loss and death. She describes the homecoming as if she “were setting foot in a house where someone had died” because she senses a “connection to an unknowable elsewhere, to the vast and mysterious place that threatens us at least as much as it makes us feel eager and whole” (Smith 345). She compares the birth of her child to the death her parents, interlinking her understanding of birth and death together.

¹⁵ Poetry “is a great vehicle for bridging the apparent divide between life in the city and life in the heartland of this country” (Dolinh).

¹⁶ In Smith’s newest book, *Wade in the Water*, she writes a poem called “Einstein’s Mother” where Smith uses “her own experience with motherhood to inform this poem written as a series of questions for Albert Einstein’s mother” (Lewis). Her first book of poetry, *The Body’s Question*, explores “the questions of the body—its capacity to feel joy, its capacity to give joy” (Als). One of the body’s obvious ways of feeling and giving joy is through conception, which leads to motherhood, giving another soul access to the joys of having a body. These are only two examples of Smith discussing motherhood—a closer analysis of her works would shed light on other instances of motherhood that complicate and support the discussion of motherhood in *Life on Mars* covered here.

¹⁷ Many of Smith’s interviews concerning *Life on Mars* have touched on Smith’s fascination with religious topics like the afterlife, but they haven’t done a serious analysis of Smith’s poems through the framework of religion. Smith herself is vague when asked about her views of religion—even though her mother was extremely dedicated to her faith. Smith questions where her mother is after she passes, explaining that even though her mother “wanted [the afterlife] to be exactly like the Bible says” that she thought it “ha[d] to be different... There’s just so much out there” (Smith 335). Smith talks about her fear of claiming organized religion like her mother, worrying that she will “likened to the Christians whose worlds were, by my estimation, too tiny, circumscribed by a few arcane commandments and deliberately impenetrable mysteries” (302). With this framework in mind, how could a religion scholar intersect with Smith’s poetry in interesting and productive ways?

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