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Images from the Hubble Space Telescope inspire poet Tracy K. Smith, whose father helped to build it.

Q&A Tracy K. Smith

The space poet

Tracy K. Smith has her head in the stars. Thanks to her late father's job as an engineer on the Hubble Space Telescope, the US poet gathers inspiration from astrophysics and cosmology. Published this year, her third collection, *Life on Mars*, explores the future of human life, the great beyond and her father's death. As she prepares for a poetry reading at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, Smith talks about the limits of space and time.

How did you begin to write about space?

I wrote a poem called 'Sci-Fi' several years ago that offered a clean and glamorous vision of the distant future. I felt fearless, writing "the word sun will have been re-assigned / to a Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device / found in households and nursing homes". Then my father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. My sense of the future became very personal. *Life on Mars* became a way to move towards my father, to try to understand some part of the mystery of death.



How did your father influence you?

I always thought of him as a Renaissance man. He drew, wrote poetry, was curious about the way the world worked and how things grew. He took me to estuaries to look at bird life. He would eat a piece of fruit, dry out the seeds and plant them in the back yard. When we watched wildlife documentaries and I'd get upset about animals killing one another, he'd remind me that predation was part of a natural cycle. Now that my father is gone, I can't look up and out without feeling like I'm looking through his eyes.

Life on Mars

TRACY K. SMITH
Graywolf: 2011.
75 pp. \$15

Several poems refer to Hubble images. Why?

They come from the edge of the observable Universe. They make me feel that I'm seeing the future, even though it is actually the distant past. Either way, that impulse to career towards what is just beyond view feels similar to the way that curiosity and desire work in our everyday lives. It is like driving at night. We have this insatiable need to get beyond the edge of what we can see. There is always something out of view that the imagination races to fill in. I also have a private attachment to the Hubble because it was part of my father's daily life for a number of years. I think of it as an extension of him when I write in 'My God, It's Full of Stars':

The first few pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed
For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe.
The second time,
The optics jibed. We saw to the edge of all there is—
So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us
back.

In one poem you write that "perhaps the great error is to believe we're alone". What are your thoughts on alien life?

A friend once argued that there are probably lots of extraterrestrial life forms but at

such a distance from us that, by the time we managed to reach them, they would no longer exist. It seemed beautifully tragic to me that we may have countless neighbours calling out into the darkness, but that time is keeping us from being a part of that conversation.

Are your poems informed by science fiction?

In Stanley Kubrick's majestic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, his most suspenseful moments are the slowest and quietest, and his associative leaps have been instructive. I have been influenced by the visual sensibilities of classic 1970s sci-fi films, such as *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Omega Man*. Isaac Asimov's 1956 short story *The Last Question* also proved to be an elegant model for the way that imagination might defy certain hard-and-fast divisions. In it, a supreme, immaterial artificial intelligence expands in scope until every human mind is an extension of it. This intelligence comes to exist outside space and time, which fall away with the demise of the Universe. It exists solely to ponder the last question that remains: 'Is there a way to begin again?'

Why do some of your poems imagine a dark future for human civilization?

The poems are playing with the psychology of progress. Our imperfections help to make us empathetic. My poem 'Sci-Fi' presents a sanitized vision of the future, an unsettling utopia in which we have outlived every threat, but where much of what we thrive on as humans has been deemed unnecessary. 'The Museum of Obsolescence' is about a museum far in the future where everything we no longer need as a species is housed: money, oil, books, tools. But I also imagined that some of the simplest and seemingly inconsequential things might be eternal, like vendors hawking bargain T-shirts outside.

An earlier poem was based on the Flores human fossil. How did that inspire you?

In 2004 I read an article in *Nature* about a species of human that inhabited the Indonesian island of Flores until about 18,000 years ago. Endemic island dwarfism meant that they and everything in their environment existed on a miniature scale — there were even dwarf elephants. I wondered what it would have been like to be a woman in that place and time. I wrote the poem in the voice of someone whose emotions, desires and will to survive are the same size as ours.

What poems are you working on next?

I have been thinking about climate change and the factions of people who doubt that it exists. I'm interested in exploring how the state of the planet may also shed light on the ways in which we treat one another. ■

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN