



“Everything Disappears as if Returning Somewhere?” Cosmic Dreaming, Fragilised Worlds, and Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to analyse how Tracy K. Smith’s award-winning collection of poems, *Life on Mars*, negotiates the material and conceptual boundaries of loss in relationship to the issues of finitude, memory, and survival. Referring to Karen Barad, Jacques Derrida, and Georges Bataille among other critics, the text analyses how Smith uses earthly and sidereal perspectives, metaphorically unpacking one in the other to challenge the regimes of presence/absence, life/death, known/unknown, or future/past. The first part of the article largely is dedicated to the poetic and philosophical encounters of the personal loss, anxieties over the future, and the complexity of materiality. In the other part, a more ethically-engaged reading of a single poem, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected,” is presented, which discusses loss as a paradoxical form of agency.

Keywords: grief, space, death, hauntology, 21st-century American poetry

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot soles.
[...]

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.¹

After the Catastrophe

In “The Inner Light,” a wonderfully poignant and deeply saddening episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, captain Jean-Luc Picard (portrayed by

1. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself (1881),” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Seventh Edition. Volume C 1865–1914*, ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Arnold Krupat (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 74.

Patrick Stewart) loses consciousness, having been affected by the energy beam released by an unidentified spaceship.² As it turns out, the seemingly hostile craft is the only remnant of an alien civilisation, which had been entirely wiped out by the nova eruption a whole millennium before the events of the primary storyline. Unbeknownst to his crew, unconscious Picard experiences vivid visions of living with the extinct civilisation as Kamin, and what lasts little over twenty minutes onboard his spaceship, the *Enterprise*, for Picard encapsulates Kamin's long life till his last day when he passes away of old age surrounded by his children and grandchildren. During many years "spent" there, Picard/Kamin gains a unique opportunity to observe, study, and experience social, environmental, and daily struggles of the now extinct civilisation firsthand, and becomes deeply engaged in its social and cultural life. A crucial twist is built on the idea that Picard/Kamin learns to play an indigenous woodwind instrument in his visions, which unexpectedly becomes the link between his two "lives." At the end of the episode, when after the death of Kamin Picard regains consciousness, his crewman passes him the very same instrument, which the latter has found while investigating the unknown ship.

"The Inner Light" is a contemplation of finitude, in which the state-of-the-art technology builds up a fantasy of not equating loss – especially an extinction event – to the void of meaning. Although the alien civilisation fails to evade its tragic fate, it manages to archive its identity in a recoverable and tangible experience, whose purpose lies in passing on old stories so that the memory outlives the catastrophe. Yet – and this is obviously missed in the episode – every archive eradicates what it promises to preserve.³ The episode openly hangs on grief for the wondrous civilisation that is no more; however, it replaces it with a anthropomorphised and Westernised vision, for in Picard/Kamin's mind the events preceding the disaster are taking place in human setting, well-too-known and well-too-predictable. What should be foreign and distant turns out to be familiar and relatable, perhaps even homely, "only bigger."⁴

I begin with *Star Trek* as I see it as an allegory of and a missing footnote to Tracy K. Smith's award-winning *Life on Mars*, a book otherwise saturated

2. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 25, "The Inner Light," directed by Peter Lauritson, story by Morgan Gendel, teleplay by Morgan Gendel and Peter Allan Fields, aired 1 June 1992.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1–3.

4. Tracy K. Smith, "My God, It's Full of Stars," in *Life on Mars* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2011), 8.

with pop-cultural and sci-fi references to Larry Niven, Arthur C. Clarke, Stanley Kubrick, and David Bowie. Underneath its daunting questions and “final frontiers,” Smith’s book arguably testifies to nearly universal human anxieties of finitude, survival, and memory. And yet, Smith’s deep space feels familiar and serene; while it might reignite childlike curiosity, foster bold dreaming, and offer consoling escapism, most of the times it evokes bitterness at best. The poetic image partly does so because it binds together human fascination with untraversable distances with general incapacity of cognising and naming cosmic phenomena fully. It is popular imagination and culture that often inform our understanding in this matter so that space becomes deceptively familiar (if not too familiar in its Westernised or Americanised construction). And partly, this bitterness is evoked by how utopian hi-tech futures are juxtaposed with the uncertain future of the Earth immersed in violence, exploitation, and degradation. Essentially, the issue of infinite distance has its counterpart in a finite perspective.

The tension between cosmic utopianism and earthly catastrophism is largely based on the confessional dimension of Smith’s poetry. Smith’s pregnancy, for one, problematises the anxieties of civilisational impact, burden, and responsibility that the future generations are bound to experience.⁵ The book is also inspired by the loss of the author’s father, a former engineer working for NASA, and conflates human finitude with nearly infinite cosmic scales of time and space. Loss, then, becomes an inherent element of both sidereal phenomena and intimate experiences, of speculative projection and historical time, and of nonhuman mechanics and human subjectivity. This creative blend problematises human finitude, survival, and memory as complex categories evading fixed divisions into the past, present, and future.

As I argue, Smith’s poetry shines when it constructs a fragilised world, a fragilised universe even. Smith uses popular and speculative forms in an artistic attempt to arrest loss in a representation that would contain its negativity. Yet, something always “gets lost” in the process. Loss seems to be transformed into something else, a different and paradoxical lack, which instead of being void-like is surprisingly vivid. Inspired by the plot of “The Inner Light,” I would like to propose to look at three specific axes of loss that intersect in Smith’s *Life on Mars*: (1) loss as an inherent uncertainty of the future; (2) loss emerging from the clash of personal and cosmic perspectives;

5. See: Claire Schwarz and Tracy K. Smith, “‘Moving toward What I Don’t Know.’ An Interview with Tracy K. Smith,” *The Iowa Review* 46, no. 2 (2016), 185–186.

and (3) loss that instead of remaining an empty figure, bringing symbolic and material processes to standstill, becomes a form of agency, which, weirdly enough, might even reach us from beyond the gates of death.

Obsolete Futures

Life on Mars and its title intentionally leave us torn between one of the fundamental questions of cosmic exploration and surreal flamboyance of David Bowie's single from his *Hunky Dory*.⁶ For Smith, even though outer space grasps us with its transcendent horizon and infinite possibilities, its image is locked in the projections determined mostly by popular culture. Against all odds, such dependence seems to make it possible for the particular representation of the universe to preserve a greater order. In "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack," the beginnings of the universe mediated by volatile processes eventually mark the reorganisation of matter, whose quantum entanglements provide its ceaseless "return" as "Everything disappears / Disappears as if returning somewhere."⁷ Despite immensely hazardous forces being at play, nonhuman worlding in this poem operates within a greater perspective of perpetual change in which nothing is forever lost. Sound does not reverberate in vacuum; still, the cosmic worlding event gains its own soundtrack. Otherwise becoming bit by bit entropic, different sections of the track harmonise in Smith's metaphoric universe, similarly to material forces being balanced out in the emergence of space as we know it.

6. David Bowie, *Hunky Dory*, 1971, RCA, CD. References to Bowie are especially important here. Not only is the title derived from "Life on Mars," originally released on *Hunky Dory*, but Smith also directly refers to *Low*, seems to be inspired by *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders of Mars* and *Aladdin Sane*, while the famous "Space Oddity," although unmentioned, remains the most obvious footnote. Two issues might be especially interesting in this respect. First, keeping in mind Smith's popcultural references, one might venture to argue that Bowie, among other artists, has shaped the Western popular imagination of the universe to the greater extent than many scientific discoveries, or simply made it less distant and inhospitable. Second, Bowie's artistic oeuvre arguably collates with what is central to Smith in *Life on Mars*. Simon Critchley notes, "At the core of Bowie's music is the exhilaration of an experience of nothing and the attempt to hold on to it. This doesn't mean that Bowie is a nihilist. Au contraire." See: Simon Critchley, *On Bowie* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2016), 57. See also: David Bowie, *David Bowie*, 1969, Philips, CD; David Bowie, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders of Mars*, 1972, RCA, CD; David Bowie, *Alladin Sane*, 1973, RCA, CD; David Bowie, *Low*, 1977, RCA, CD.

7. Tracy K. Smith, "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack," in *Life on Mars*, 24.

Cosmic ceaselessness and mutability in *Life on Mars* might be read as signs of bitter hope (if not comfort), keeping a better organisation of the world as a yet unfulfilled promise. Or, at least, it keeps a promise of meaning in a seemingly meaningless reality. Rooted in popular representations, childhood memories, and Smith's father's stories, this conviction to an extent relies on honest naiveté occasionally resonating in *Life on Mars* juxtaposed with the perspective of growing disappointment with the determined earthly existence in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene.⁸ In the eighth part of the eponymous poem, Smith presents a litany to (the) earth/Earth and a testimony to violent human history; we read:

[...] The earth
Floating in darkness, suspended in spin.
The earth gunning it around the sun.
The earth we ride in disbelief.
The earth we plunder like thieves.
The earth caked to mud in the belly
Of a village with no food. Burying us.
The earth coming off our shoes.⁹

Contrary to simultaneously recollected nostalgic memories of her own home, the Earth is surrounded in the darkness of the solar system, while its unique properties sustaining life condemn it to solitude. The Earth, in turn, is often presented as a space of alienation, exploitation, and oppression. Smith reminds us of it when she calls for justice for the tortured prisoners, the victims of gun violence, or the woman abused and held captive in a cellar by her father for decades.¹⁰ In a way, the possibility of a ceaseless universe backfires with a threat of everlasting history of violence being repeated over and over again.

8. Paulina Ambroży expands the interconnections between naiveté, romanticisation of cosmic reality, and what she refers to as cosmic sublime in: Paulina Ambroży, "Our Eyes Adjust to the Dark': The Cosmic Sublime in Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars*," *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* 10 (2020), 364–391. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.10.20>

9. Tracy K. Smith, "Life on Mars," in *Life on Mars*, 24.

10. James Edward Ford III notes, "'Space' and the 'universe' function as metaphors for American life and as an infinity that puts American life in new perspective. It is at once a metaphor and something stating the very possibility for metaphor." See: James Edward Ford III, "'Space Is the Place.' Afrofuturist Elegy in Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars*," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 1 (2014), 161. Emphasis in the original.

This temporal conundrum is expanded in another poem, directly inspired by Bowie, “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?” We read:

Time never stops, but does it end? And how many lives
Before take-off, before we find ourselves
Beyond ourselves, all glam-glow, all twinkle and gold?

The future isn’t what it used to be. [...] ¹¹

Future which “isn’t what it used to be,” a future which arrives as radically different than the one which has been expected, manifests itself as a failed project and makes human fantasies obsolete. As I see it, future has paradoxically been prescribed in the past through the glittery techno-scientific and popular narratives that are already at hand. Because of it, instead of fulfilling any promise the humanity might invest in it, and usually does, future upon its realisation leaves us with disappointment. This is especially visible in “The Museum of Obsolescence,” in which future marks a timeframe when all concepts are eventually worn-out, and the objects we once desired or hoped to use for a greater good “return [...] / To uselessness with the mute acquiescence / Of shed skin.” ¹² Among these curiosities, the last object the visitors have access to is a lonely image of a planet. After seeing it, they are approached by the vendors outside the post-apocalyptic museum selling t-shirts. Once again Smith returns to the image of the Earth as a solitary planet, only this time the planet suspended in darkness: a single logo on otherwise empty t-shirts. ¹³ A worn-out planetary perspective gives way to the primacy of commodification and self-interest. When everything is allegedly obsolete, the capitalocenic world system persists and monetises the end of the world. In an ironical twist, it is robust capitalism that is supposed to thrive even after the end of the world.

In Smith’s book, what is earthly is at first homely, accommodating, perhaps even protecting; still, her poems grimly render that most experiences of dwelling entail the crisis of *oikos*. If the Earth is a site of danger or decline, then the distance offered by the cosmos’ distinct spaces and temporalities might be the root of comforting and safe narratives. Although the unscathed universe

11. Tracy K. Smith, “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?,” in *Life on Mars*, 20.

12. Tracy K. Smith, “The Museum of Obsolescence,” in *Life on Mars*, 14.

13. Smith, “Museum of Obsolescence,” 14.

might provide a suitable counterpart to living in the uncertain times, Smith does not allow the readers to become overly complacent about it. In “The Universe Is a House Party,” a cosmic event is compared to a party we are not invited to; we can only hear distorted noises through the walls. In this twist on Plato’s cave, just as the uninvited guests react with fantasies of the humanity’s absolute and unconditional hospitality in the scenarios that never eventually come to being, we might often too eagerly frame the need for “going beyond” inside deeply human, and so limited, experiences.¹⁴ In “Sci-fi,” on a different note, the utopian future making space safe and graspable is actually achieved at the cost of leaving the solar system once and for all.¹⁵ In both cases, Smith warns us about the dangers of our excessive dependence on techno-scientific or popular visions of space we live in as necessarily conditioned by loss: precisely, an inability of reaching its fabric. Instead, as Smith shows, we rather fall into “think[ing] of it as a parallel to what we know / Only bigger.”¹⁶

Space(s) of Grief

Life on Mars constructs a nearly *pharmakonic* relationship between the Earth in times of unrest and cosmic imagery. Each of them prescribes the other in itself, so that the metaphoric cure to the anxieties of finitude comes at the cost of blissful dissolution in the distant and the remote. Moreover, the sidereal stands for the narratives that prescribe the world as eventually setting-itself-right, repeating the logic that has arguably made environmental and social crises possible in the first place. Yet, Smith seems to be faithful to exploring a different dimension of the said poetics as well, which might realise what Stacy Alaimo calls the *ethics of inhabiting*.¹⁷ Alaimo conceives of domestic spaces whose walls, be it physical or conceptual, neither “disconnect” nor “domesticate,” but rather attune us to “the pleasure of interconnection and the joy of unexpected”¹⁸ and “the possibilities of becoming in relation to a radical otherness that has been known as ‘nature.’”¹⁹

14. Tracy K. Smith, “The Universe Is a House Party,” in *Life on Mars*, 13.

15. Tracy K. Smith, “Sci-fi,” in *Life on Mars*, 7.

16. Smith, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 8.

17. Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 18.

18. Alaimo, *Exposed*, 18.

19. Alaimo, *Exposed*, 18.

In Smith, the real promise of sidereal poetics lies in “boldly going where no one has gone before,” and reconnecting with the world that resists human comprehension and yet remains an intrinsic part of our existence. In the poem “It & Co.,” the titular pronoun marks that which escapes human cognition altogether, never finding any stable referent.²⁰ To an extent, “it” undoubtedly exists in a particular material form; still, “[i]t avoids the blunt ends / Of our fingers as we point”²¹ and “resists the matter of false vs real.”²² Identifiable by neither theological nor scientific systems, it leaves us with a sole impression of being “like some novels: / vast and unreadable.”²³ The challenge of size and comprehension, however, goes beyond the impossibility of cognition in this case, as the aforementioned closing remark points to a taunt and not necessarily an actual negation. Any attempt of reaching the material “it” of reality, or perhaps the thing-in-itself, is incongruous and impossible. What might be possible, however, is readiness and willingness to become vulnerable when confronted by the incomprehensible excess of materiality or being. Elsewhere, Smith compares a nameless “it” to a wound, whereas in “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?,” the speaker yearns for being locked-up in an everlasting childlike fantasy in which “[she]’ll touch the world with bare hands / Even if it burns.”²⁴

I purposefully juxtapose here the ethics of inhabiting aimed at interconnection with the challenge posed by brute, wound-like, and painful materiality. In the poetics of Smith, as I see it, these two realms meet. Her cosmic dimensions of grief, in which the unbearable weight of grieving is compensated by excessively spatialised representations, turn the world itself nearly into a co-mourner to the grieving subject.

At the intersection of philosophical and psychoanalytical readings, we might dare say that Smith conflates the material and the traumatic (as trauma is essentially a wound). It seems that the unbearableness of personal loss meets here resistance inseparable from accessing the reality directly. As she demonstrates, both of them tend to share a common ground in the defining role of loss. At the same time, this negative kernel, instead of turning them into static entities (or barriers), conditions their vivid agencies. As long as they are not comprehended entirely, they remain highly active since they are

20. Tracy K. Smith, “It & Co.,” in *Life on Mars*, 17.

21. Smith, “It & Co.,” 17.

22. Smith, “It & Co.,” 17.

23. Smith, “It & Co.,” 17.

24. Smith, “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?,” 19.

persistent in not only their resistance to meaning, but also their insistence on our desires of going beyond against all odds. Smith joins the aforementioned realms in “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” where “[...] space might be choc-full of traffic, / Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel / Nor see [...]”²⁵ As she quickly adds, these cosmic energies belong to the realm of the dead:

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last,
Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on
At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns
Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want it to be
One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.
Wide open, so everything floods in at once.
And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time,
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.
So that I might be sitting now beside my father
As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe
For the first time in the winter of 1959.²⁶

In a biographical twist, Smith’s attempt to think of the universe returns to the thoughts of her late father as the one who once showed her space for the very first time, as we read in the closing sections of “My God, It’s Full of Stars.” This marks a crucial moment in the collection. Partly, this shift is inspired by the twentieth-century discoveries in physics and the theory of relativity. At the same time, thanks to the first experiences of seeing the universe through the Hubble Telescope recollected in the poem, the temporal shift also relies on the act of stargazing as the work of loss, disclosing galaxies full of objects that are there no more. What is, however, worth noting as well is the fact that temporal shifts are also inherent in trauma, whose *afterwardsness*, as Jacques Laplanche proposes, breaks the linear progression of events and affects.²⁷

The material potentialities of space and time demarcate the afterlife where cosmic excess might be recognised and comprehended. We might arguably understand it in a materialist way, hinted at in Smith’s other poems. In line

25. Smith, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 10.

26. Smith, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 10.

27. See: Jean Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardsness,” in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), 264–269.

with such a reading, space witnesses transformation and reorganisation of matter, including that which we consist of. What might be interesting as well is to focus on “the frenzy of being”²⁸ which the speaker wishes to be “like a radio without a dial / Wide open, so everything floods in at once.”²⁹ Then, Smith provides us with a thought-experiment in the abolition of temporal and spatial limits so that everything that was, is, and will be melts into one. When such a realm is provisionally constructed, the fixed limits of death cease to exist as well, not just making the reunion with the departed possible, but also invalidating the very basis for reunion represented in the idyllic homecoming at the end of the stanza.³⁰

In this light, Smith’s meditations on matter and loss conjure up a hauntological plane in both Derridean and Baradian sense. As in Derrida, the regimes of the living and the dead depend on the foreclosure of presence and absence.³¹ Both homely and cosmic dimensions of Smith’s works occasion in spectral encounters, where the speculative meets the tangible, while the dead are familiar to the living. Yet, any of these encounters is equally situational and temporary; linguistic and material excess that evades logocentricised positions of life and death occasions in a weird figure of survival in which the dead are convoked and revoked in the same act.³² Thanks to that, Smith’s poetry might offer us a critical project, aiming at dismantling our overly fixed fantasies of the world and of outer space, and a creative one, speculating on an unhinging of the future and opening us to the strangeness of what is radically unexpected. This brings us closer to Karen Barad’s understanding of hauntology, which reshapes the fabrics and textures of being.³³ Smith’s “frenzy of being” is

28. Smith, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 10.

29. Smith, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 10.

30. Ambroży brilliantly notes, “The transcendental trope of the cosmic, ever-widening gaze allows the poet to displace, for a moment, the painful experience of death, and reimagine afterlife as a black hole, an infinite void or abyss into which ‘everything floods in at once . . . so nothing escapes / Not even time.’ The imagined obliteration of any definite temporality pulls the reader into an illegible non-atmosphere, a temporal chasm bypassing history and human measurements of life’s relentless flux.” Ambroży, “Our Eyes Adjust to the Dark,” 383.

31. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), xvii–xviii.

32. See: Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign. Volume II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 117. See also: Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xix–xx.

33. Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, Spacetime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-come,” *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010), 254.

a figure of all-encompassing indeterminacy which partakes in the radical worlding processes, or *spacetime mattering* as Barad would call it.³⁴ For Barad, matter and meaning are recognised in the moment of creative becoming, where their interconnectedness with everything that is meets a cut through which limits are determined. Both interpretations of hauntology converge with Smith's exercise in loss beyond any definite loss. As she diligently writes in "My God, It's Full of Stars," in the cosmic perspective, the division into spectral and actual encounters is obsolete. Moreover, our existence should be envisioned as coexistence transgressing temporal and spatial limits. In this light, a radical sense of hope might be regained, understood through the promise of what is to come and unappropriated by the fantasies of the future which eventually let us down.

Chaos Made Flesh

Spectacular and distant, spectral and wounded: the more Smith departs from the earthly and personal, the more her book returns to the question of individual life and individual grief. *Life on Mars'* vivid and sidereal poetics arguably rethinks epistemic and ethical horizons of "being here" within the more-than-human universe. Yet, Smith's meditations on loss and grief attune us to the world whose temporality is more than ever acclaimed as being "out-of-joint." All these tensions are perhaps best captured in "No-Fly Zone," where we read: "What would your life say if it could talk?"³⁵ Giving voice to life in Smith's question presupposes a possibility of learning the ultimate truth from life itself, though the interrogative tone suggests one's unwillingness of hearing it. And yet, while the aural agency of the otherwise silent universe records both the transcendental and material in "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack,"³⁶ and while the morning screams of children playing are compared to the mythicized vagituses or primal cries at the down of the (human?) world in "The Universe as the Primal Scream,"³⁷ the aforementioned question leaves life deceptively silent. Perhaps life is a concept that is already unable to encompass its own referent.

34. Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2011), 148–149.

35. Tracy K. Smith, "No-Fly Zone," in *Life on Mars*, 45.

36. Smith, "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack," 24.

37. Tracy K. Smith, "The Universe as the Primal Scream," in *Life on Mars*, 58.

On another note, perhaps there is something deeply embarrassing and threatening in the very possibility of accessing life's most hidden secrets, the pre-supposed truth of oneself, or the great Other the Self attempts to repress. It is not that surprising that the Western culture prefers to give voice to the dead instead.

The hauntological reflections indicated in the previous part might thrive on this particular perspective; after all, it is on numerous occasions, and especially in *Spectres of Marx* and his last interview, that Derrida poses the question of "learning to live finally," or learning to live at the end, as the task to be learned from the dead.³⁸ Derrida argues that "[t]he time of 'learning to live,' a time without tutelary present, would amount to this, to which the exordium is leading us: to learn to live *with* ghost, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*."³⁹ As I see it, such an understanding is close to Smith's book, where the collision of the earthly and the cosmic blends the regimes of life/death and presence/absence, and attempts to give justice to those who do not have an opportunity to reclaim it.

"They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected" is a poem detached from the futuristic and cosmic poetics of the text discussed earlier; however, it similarly negotiates the limits of loss using the everyday and the uncanny. Although the enigmatic title is derived from one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, "The Community Rule," a text on the significance of the love for the neighbour, Smith's poem focuses on the contemporary society as being largely torn by hatred. We read:

Hate spreads itself out thin and skims the surface,
Nudged along by the tide. When the waves go all to chop,

It breaks up into little bits that scurry off. Some
Get snapped up by what swims, which gets snapped up

Itself. Hooked through the lip or the gills and dragged
Onto deck to bat around at the ankles of men who'll beat it,

38. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xvii.

39. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xvii. Emphasis in the original.

Then scrape off the scales and fry it in oil. Afterward,
Some will sleep. And some will feel it bobbing there
On the inside. The night is different after that. Too small.⁴⁰

Both a religious allusion and physical activity, fishing becomes yet another figure rendering history as history of violence. In this respect, fish conjures up a negative communion and negative transfiguration, both of which spread hatred on humanity. As the opening lines suggest, hatred is not determined by a conscious act; rather, it lurks closely to the surface, and then accidentally is taken into our lives. Then everything changes; the night and the body are deprived of composure and relaxation, whereas hatred starts to expand until both the human and the world are too small to contain it. As we read later on, in order to be vented out, hatred finds escape in violating the fragility of human life, when it emerges from “fear/ [...] / like a bone caught in the throat.”⁴¹ Fear happens to be a universal trait that establishes a minimal difference between the victims and the perpetrators.

“They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected” reaches its peak in the fourth part, entitled “In which the Dead Send Postcards to Their Assailants from America’s Most Celebrated Landmarks.” By means of five fictional postcards, Smith gives voice to the victims of gun violence killed in May and June 2009. Brisenia writes: “My daddy says we’re free now to do whatever we want. [...]. I hope to become a dancer or a veterinarian.”⁴² Stephen “feel[s] like [himself]”: “Mostly it’s just nice to move through crowds like I used to: unnoticed.”⁴³ Johanna is fascinated by the new opportunities of visiting various places in the blink of an eye; “I’m happy,”⁴⁴ she adds. Omar rarely thinks about his killer: “I think you feel humble, human. I hardly think of you, but when I do, it’s usually that.”⁴⁵ Smith’s postcards are uninterested in grief, accusation, or despair; their authors experience completion granted by regained freedom, mundaneness, or new abilities. Although overall naïve, they affirm that which death makes impossible, and prevent the victims from being reduced to the eternalised moment of their deaths, as if it captured

40. Tracy K. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected,” in *Life on Mars*, 48.

41. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen,” 52.

42. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen,” 50.

43. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen,” 50.

44. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen,” 51.

45. Smith, “They May Love All That He Has Chosen,” 51.

their lives as well. Through the metaphors of freedom, movement, and plans for the future, Smith defies immobility culturally associated with the dead body and rejects a possibility of compressing one's life to a single event of murder.

The medium and the genre of a postcard in such a stern context is surprising at best. The postcard is an epitome of the phatic function. It contains simplified facts and conventional phrases. Essentially, it is a one-way communication as the recipient is not supposed to reply to the original message. There seems to be a general agreement for postcards to yield any intended meaning to a commercialised image of travelling within a greater consumerist phantasy. Still, the postcard corrects or substitutes the actual travel, as what is included in it is rarely true, regardless of the side of the postcard one looks at. Perhaps this accepted degree of inaccuracy makes it possible for Smith to use this medium to articulate her renouncement of violating the fragility of life. Written on postcards, the speculative narrative is torn between fact and fiction, yet none of them takes precedence. Instead, this narrative uses postcards as signs of grief when grief itself is deliberately unmentioned. Although the text overlooks mourning regardless of its preoccupation with killings, it does so in an inappropriate form to show that there are no representations to the tragedy caused by the loss of life. Consequently, grief is mediated by anxiety and dissonance, which on the affective level challenge the boundaries of the reading subjects and confront them with the real puncturing the thick veil of what has been repressed.

Similarly to the other poems included in *Life on Mars*, "They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected" is largely hauntological. For Derrida, hauntology is a supplement to ontology.⁴⁶ As the former concept both invalidates and reaffirms the latter, it also reveals a differential dynamics of "being" and mobilises regimes of spatial and temporal indeterminacy.⁴⁷ The spectre is a figure of both summoning and exorcism, whose arrival becomes indiscernible from its dissipation.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, Smith adopts the perspectives of victims through textual decoys which both summon and wipe the former away. Smith's speakers engage in a dialogue in which nobody is present; the victims are transformed into literary agents. Although such an act might exhibit their rights, and, therefore, act in a political way,⁴⁹ most

46. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 202. In French, hauntologie and ontologie are homonyms.

47. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 5.

48. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 50–59.

49. I am thinking here especially about the gesture similar to the one Jacques Rancière proposes with his *partage du sensible*. In this way, the aestheticised postcards would serve

of the times it emphasises emptiness left by the deceased. In her reading of Robert P. Harrison's *The Dominion of the Dead*, Ewa Domańska argues that the dead are valuable to the living. She notes, "[T]he living prolong the existence of the dead; [...] it is the dead that legalise the existence of the living."⁵⁰ Because of that, death itself does not annul said relationship, but rather redefines it as a surplus and as a debt.⁵¹ What seems to persist, then, is a relational figure of fragility, which cannot be entirely integrated into life or death, and yet survives the biological death. In the light of Smith's poem, we might see how the poetic form becomes nearly metonymic to its content. Smith's recognition of the rights of the victims prolongs their existence and constantly reminds us of the fact that they are gone. However, this recognition is hardly a nihilist one. Judith Butler shows that vulnerability conditions one's capability to lose life and, simultaneously, determines life as inherently grievable.⁵² Ethical responsibility for any life, in turn, emerges when life transcends itself on the very condition that it might be lost.⁵³

The hauntological potential of Smith's postcards is determined equally by their form and the tragic events behind them. In *The Post Card*, Derrida notices that any postcard is a vessel for the Other. Derrida argues that unlike letters, postcards are not carried in envelopes, which renders their contents volatile.⁵⁴ To be precise, it cannot be decided how many people have read

the purpose of making the victims visible in the ethical call for justice. Davide Panagia notes, "The inequality of a *partage du sensible* that establishes a hierarchy between those who know and those who do not know, between those whose viewing provides good interpretations and those who passively look, thus holds the potential for its own dissolution. If the line of partition is the point of contact between sharing and division that structures the dynamics of a *partage du sensible*, then Rancière always holds open the possibility of a political part-taking ('avoir-part') by those who have no part in the established system of distribution." Davide Panagia, "'Partage du sensible': The Distribution of the Sensible," in *Jacques Rancière. Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 102. See: Davide Panagia, "'Partage du sensible,'" 95–115.

50. Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017), 69. Translation mine. The original text reads: "[Ż]ywi są potrzebni zmarłym, by przedłużyć ich istnienie [...]; zmarli zaś potrzebni są żywym, by legalizować ich istnienie." Domańska refers here to Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

51. Domańska, *Nekros*, 69.

52. Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 14–15.

53. Butler, *Frames of War*, 14–15.

54. Jacques Derrida, "Envois," in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). 13–14.

it before the addressee nor whether the text itself has been tampered with while being delivered. These features of the text, which explicitly call its referentiality into question, incorporate postcards into Derrida's lexicon of figures that bind the instability of meaning with an imperative of writing. In Smith's poem, both the apostrophe to the assailants and the acknowledgment of the victims' voices involve exposure to the Other. All five postcards testify to the fragility and inadequacy of poetic language incapable of grasping the unrepresentable death of an individual. Yet, the medium's imperfection forges a nearly metonymical relation with the phenomena that elude signification altogether: trauma, vulnerability, and loss. Finally, the textual volatility of the medium, thanks to which postcards are foreclosed by the Other, signifies a different regime of contingency installed by fear, violence, and hatred. While referring to the five cases of killings, Smith highlights the thin line between the assailants and victims, whose everyday expectations, routines, and behaviours are not that different, and whose positions might be, in fact, accidental.

The signatures beneath the postcards provide Smith with personas and masks, which problematise life/death, presence/absence, and self/other dichotomies since they disassemble the writing subject. As Georges Bataille notes, "The mask is chaos made flesh. It stands in front of me as my fellow being, and this being, which stares at me, has become the figure of my own death."⁵⁵ Smith's poetic postcards become portents and agents of death, bringing together the discontinuity of life and instability of meaning. What is more, they also articulate the greater anxiety over one's transience, when the speaker of other parts of the poem renounces her voice. In order to emerge as distinct voices, all five postcards temporarily annihilate this subject, confronting the writing author with a possible absence of her own voice and, thus, staging a possibility of non-existence.

Naïve Hopes and the Uncertain Times

I have started with a reference to "The Inner Light" to prefigure three dimensions of loss in Smith's *Life on Mars*. In the discussed episode, although loss originated in a cosmic catastrophe, it also employed the experience of

55. Georges Bataille, "Le masque," in *Œuvres complètes*, tome II, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 404. Translation mine. The original text reads: "[L]e masque est le chaos devenu chair. Il est présent devant moi comme un semblable et ce semblable, qui me dévisage, a pris en lui la figure de ma propre mort."

the everyday as a medium of commemoration and communication of what is lost. Smith's book seems to conceptualise loss from three corresponding angles: (1) the planetary uncertainty of the future, (2) the personal projection re-educated by the cosmic, and (3) the artistic attempt to give the voice to the lost ones. *Life on Mars* approaches loss on personal, epistemological, and ethical levels, which I largely discussed in reference to hauntology. For Smith, the everyday and the cosmic are tightly linked together. The everyday filters our understanding of the otherwise inhospitable universe we are part of, which resists cognition and signification. The cosmic, respectively, offers utopian daydreaming for the times of political and personal unrest, and fosters naïve hopes for the uncertain times. Together, these two dimensions suspend the life/death dichotomy as they establish new material configurations in which fixed and situated perceptions of time and space are no longer tenable. Such a hauntological twist reenvisions the communities of the living and the dead in ways that might be inspiring and consoling both as intimate experiences and as political acts. This last aspect is especially visible in "They May Love All That He Has Chosen and Hate All That He Has Rejected." Although this poem is not indebted to cosmic imagery, the sidereal poetics of *Life on Mars* allows us to recognise how Smith relativises life/death, presence/absence, and present/past on the "earthly" level as well. The text offers a speculative attempt at working-through selected instances of gun violence, when one faces irrepresentability of loss and fragility of human life, and yet mobilises the new regimes capable of recognising individual stories of the victims. These, in turn, blur the distance between the bystanders and the victims, the living and the dead. What is at stake here is the emergence of a temporary communion functioning across life and death, which makes it possible for us to recognise the fragile "I" in the fragile "Other," cultivate responsibility for oneself and the Other, and tighten social bonds for the uncertain times.

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