

“At Lightspeed the Nightfield Deepens”: John Smith’s Cosmic Fireflies

By David Hickey

During his term as the inaugural poet laureate of Prince Edward Island,¹ John Smith gave a series of public lectures on English poetry from its beginnings to its present forms. Employing the familiar figure of the time machine as a means of structuring his talks, Smith coaxed audience members to join him in an imaginary vehicle as he piloted them from one period to the next. The conceit of literary time travel was, most immediately, an engaging way of structuring a public lecture for non-specialists. Yet for those in the audience already familiar with Smith’s poetry, the gesture was also consistent with the ongoing negotiation with time and space that unfolds in his writing. Consider, for instance, the last stanza of “The World: A Hypothesis,” where his engagement with temporal and spatial possibilities appears at the apex of its complexity:

At lightspeed the nightfield deepens, and we plunge
outward towards origin, scrolling back through time’s
aggrandizing entropy. Look there. Now you see them.
Now. You don’t. Fireflies. In the magnolia grove.

(Fireflies 24-27)

As the poem shifts into light speed, its cosmological darkness deepens, and the implied passengers find themselves simultaneously “scrolling back through time’s / aggrandizing entropy,” even as they “plunge / outward towards origin.” The verb “scrolling” is carefully chosen here to recall the ancient world, as though the immense scale of the redshifting universe had suddenly collapsed manuscript rolls and Hubble imagery into a single temporal space. Smith’s allusion to entropy, modified by the verb “scrolling,” places the laws of thermodynamics in a scriptorium that is, it would seem, rushing out to greet the origins of the universe. The field of view ultimately focuses on the specific scene of fireflies in a magnolia grove, but only after the semantic momentum of the stanza is slowed by seven periods. This shift towards fragmentation acts as a velocity parachute that dramatizes the

ending: as cosmic fireflies flicker and fade, their fleeting light is suggestive of the short-lived nature of existence on both human and cosmic scales. Yet this dim scattering of light provides only the semblance of resolution. It is as though the poem's final image were broadcast from a ship bearing down on the prospect of infinity: having arrived at a point of celestial revelation, its illuminated findings only bring greater mysteries into view.

In his Introduction to *Island Voices: John Smith*, a video produced by the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, Smith describes his poems as "interim reports on how the world's prospects looked as of a particular day" (Smith n. pag.). "The World: A Hypothesis," for its part, dramatizes these prospects in relation to the relatively unfamiliar concept of the cyclic universe in order to explore humanity's place in the relentless passage of time. Such broadminded deliberations, unfolding as they do within a poetic whose rich diction dances elegantly towards the indeterminate, bring the likes of John Ashbery immediately to mind (Leckie 28; McOrmond n. pag). And yet the shift from the sublime to the picturesque that occurs at the end of "The World: A Hypothesis" equally recalls the prospect poems of the late eighteenth century, many of which rely, as Susan Glickman has argued at length, on "the co-operation of the sublime aesthetic with the picturesque method" (153).

In Smith's contemplation of the depths of Space, as well as in the topographical poems that distantly precede it, readers encounter "a moment of narrative stasis" in which the speaker pauses to visualize a scene in order to highlight its significance within a broader narrative (24). Not unlike the "shining fire-flies" that appear at the end of Thomas Cary's *Abram's Plains* (1789), Smith's fireflies are an instance of pictorial clarity that connects the local enchantment of fireflies with far more distant lights. Present in both poems is a form of vicarious tourism that provides readers with a model for visually conceptualizing the foreign scene so as to render it appreciable. Unlike the eighteenth century devotees of the picturesque, however, who found "relief in landscape from the perplexities of human existence," Smith's associative logic leaves these perplexities deliberately unresolved, as if to suggest that uncertainty is a necessary, corrective measure; indeed, his epistemological restlessness runs counter to the singularity of the well-ordered imperial vision that grants immediate permission to claim and to possess (24). "The World: A Hypothesis," as a postmodern version of the prospect poem, concludes with a picturesque image that appears without the accompanying narrative of stable, forward progress. Instead, the vehicle of the poem reverses its engines into an endless recoil

of repetitive time and space, one that is only intermittently interrupted by familiar yet fleeting sights, such as fireflies, whose diffuse light never fully comes into focus. In its paradoxical quest for a knowledge steeped in uncertainty, Smith's poetry finds its natural counterpart in the firefly's illuminated path, the light from which remains a tantalizing blur that refuses to be resolved.

Following the prompt issued in "The World: A Hypothesis" to pause and to look—an imperative that Smith repeats twice in the final two lines—this essay follows the light of these fireflies through Smith's poetry as a means of grappling with the complex relationship between uncertainty, inconclusiveness, and the sublime that is so emblematic of his work. Few exercises could be more in keeping with the intellectual presence that Smith has established in Prince Edward Island over the past fifty years, during which time his fascination with the particular qualities of individual poems has been made clear time and again through countless performances, lectures, and public talks. In reading "The World: A Hypothesis" in relation to the complementary concepts of the cyclic universe and the theme of eternal reoccurrence that presents itself in Smith's earlier writing, I aim to illustrate here that "The World: A Hypothesis" belongs to a body of work whose sophistication and intellectual richness rewards those willing to pursue its individual strands at length.

"A Season of Flowering Galaxies:" Space, Scale, and the Sublime

Interpretations of Smith's poetry have thus far consistently recognized the uncertainty and inconclusiveness as defining characteristics of his writing. Brent MacLaine's essay "In Search of a Sacred Space" (2010), for example, frames Smith's poetry in relation to George Steiner's concept of "rich undecidability" (23). For MacLaine, the concept of difficulty as it relates to Smith's writing is largely the confluence of decisions that Smith has made as a poet in terms of form, content, and diction. Indeed, unlike many of his Atlantic Canadian contemporaries, Smith's poems are more likely to reference a concept from physics than a familiar geographical landmark.² If his poetry is personally revealing at all, it is in the broadest sense, as Smith's poems are almost entirely free of biographical references, much less the confessional salve that aims to achieve some sense of palliative catharsis. Whereas such poetry seeks to renew psychological stability through the ordering power of narrative, Smith's poems resist these comforts. Smith's is a poetry "whose beauty," MacLaine writes, "comes not from any lyrical mellifluousness or imagistic economy, and still less from evocative realism; rather, this is a beauty of the bravely declarative" (25).

The “bravely declarative” and the bravely inconclusive as well: his poems resist closure, appealing instead to readers “who value inquiry over easy answers and who find wonder and joy and terror at every touch and turn” (Wells 13). They are, as Henry Bessel noted in the Preface that accompanied Smith’s first collection, *Winter In Paradise* (1972), “leaves from the tree of uncertainty” (11).

In a special issue of *Canadian Notes and Queries* dedicated to his poetry, Smith addressed this longstanding indifference to conclusions in relation to his approach to teaching. “One thing that people may criticize about my method,” he stated, “is that it never comes to conclusions. And for people who like a measure of certainty, this can be uncomfortable” (8). Whatever degree of discomfort Smith’s approach to writing and teaching may cause, the distinctiveness of his poetry provides rich veins for interpretation and exploration, precisely because the poems themselves appear designed to leave the wishes of a reader who would know them in some final, authoritative way unfilled. Rather, readers must possess what Nietzsche (1901) called “the enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty” in order to appreciate the patterns that occur—and reoccur—in his writing (1060).

Smith’s loose sonnet form is one such repeating pattern. To open a copy of *Midnight Found You Dancing* (1986), *Strands the Length of the Wind* (1993), or *Fireflies in the Magnolia Grove* (2004) is to encounter free verse sonnets varying in length from thirteen to fifteen lines, none of which meet with the expectations of most contemporary lyrical poetry in the way that they begin or end. If the title of a lyric poem conventionally provides some kind of dramatic premise that situates the reader in relation to the world of the poem, then Smith’s decision to elevate the first few words of a poem as its title is in some ways to resist that poem’s autonomy. Correspondingly, Smith’s sestets generally do not resolve the question or problem posed through the octaves that precede them, although shifts in thinking or imagery do take place. The lack of resolution present in these poems, coupled with the arbitrariness of their titles, renders porous the borders between individual sonnets. As one poem pours into another, and as the intellectual deliberations at the centre of these poems proceed uninterrupted, the effect is one of accumulating uncertainties; even the most expert readers may find themselves adrift in the sublimity of entertaining so many possibilities freed from the promise of resolution.

As Ross Leckie has explained, Smith “participates in a particular form of the postmodern sublime that in its techniques of juxtaposition collapses the readily identifiable measures of magnitude between the individual and

the infinitely grand that form the basis of the Romantic sublime” (28). Indeed, Jean-François Lyotard’s remark about Barnett Newman’s Avant-Garde painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* holds true for Smith’s poetry as well: “It’s still the sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described, and yet it isn’t their sublime any more” (93). The postmodern sublime emerges instead, as Joseph Tabbi has argued, from tensions “between mind and machine, organic nature and human construction, metaphorical communication and the technological transfer of information” (1). It is “a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency...” that only unfolds within “the most energetic postmodernist texts” (1; Jameson 37). Between Frederic Jameson’s unnerving “glimpse” of hidden power structures, and Lyotard’s imperative that artists pursue the sublime as a means of grappling with forms of technological violence that exceed articulation, the postmodern sublime emerges as an aesthetic category, as an ethical framework, and as an opportunity. For Smith, the postmodern sublime is, at least in part, a gateway to new possibility. “Anxiety about indeterminism is actually a source of energy,” he relates in a 2006 interview with Anne Compton, “and in the upside there can be a sense of freedom” (383). By aligning anxiety, energy, freedom, and indeterminism, Smith suggests that the endless circularity of existence is both sublime and liberating.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that scientific discovery should at times figure into Smith’s formulations of the sublime. Dating back to his undergraduate education in mathematics and physics at the University of Toronto, his interest in physics,³ for example, finds expression in those instances where he dramatizes concepts ranging from thermodynamics to quantum mechanics in order to register the scale on which they unfold. What complicates these expressions, however, is the way in which Smith undermines otherwise stable reference points for registering magnitude, as though the infinitesimally small and unimaginably large were not so much opposites, as they were interchangeable possibilities coexisting on the same plane.

One way to appreciate the sublime nature of these sliding scales is to compare the closing image of “The World: A Hypothesis” to the astrograph that likely inspired it. Appearing a total of seven times in Smith’s *Fireflies in the Magnolia Grove*, “Galaxy Cluster Abell 1689” was captured by aiming the Hubble Space Telescope’s camera directly into the galaxy cluster’s gravitational lens, producing an immersive image, the depth of which is the result of light curving around the cluster’s centre (“Biggest ‘Zoom Lens’ in Space” n. pag.). The halos of light that appear around the

yellow and orange galaxies in the image do, in fact, resemble the fireflies that appear at the end of Smith's "The World: A Hypothesis." The poem and the image are similar in that "they appear to present the universe as one might see it," or at least how one might imagine seeing it, if that kind of Space travel were possible (Kessler 4).

Part of the fascination with Hubble images is undoubtedly the extent to which they render the vast depths of the universe in patterns of colour and light that are simultaneously alien and recognizable to their viewers. In *The Astronomical Sublime* (2012), an extended study of the Hubble images as art, Elizabeth A. Kessler writes that "the cosmic neighbourhood gains familiarity through its resemblance to the earthly landscape. Instead of a confused space, it becomes a place into which we can mentally travel" (221). Central to Kessler's argument is the extent to which these images are as much aesthetic configurations as they are objects of astronomical study. As Kessler observes, "[t]he appearance of the Hubble images depends on the careful choices of astronomers who assigned colors, adjusted contrast, and composed the images. Although attentive to the data that lie behind the images," Kessler explains, "through their decisions astronomers encourage a particular way of seeing the cosmos" (5). As the result of these various stages of processing, Hubble images come to "bear a striking resemblance to earthly geological and meteorological formation," Kessler argues, "especially as depicted in Romantic landscapes of the American West" (5). Kessler's argument pulls in two directions at once: while eager to see the similarities between J.M.W. Turner's painting and the Hubble spacescapes, she is reluctant to label the latter as necessarily constituting a form of frontierism. Instead, she concludes quite reasonably that the Hubble images are "an invitation to continue our scientific exploration and study of the cosmos; conquest occurs at the level of understanding, not through physical settlement" (216). Even so, it is possible to admire these Hubble images while at the same time recognizing that they possess, in Kessler's words, the "dangerous potential to limit our ability to see" (230).

This "ability to see" is of central importance to both Smith's "The World: A Hypothesis" and to the Hubble image "Galaxy Cluster Abell 1689." After all, both poem and image produce forms of seeing: they have in common the desire to render visible regions of the universe that otherwise remain hidden from view. They also engender appreciation alike for the immensity of Space and the corresponding smallness of our planetary home. At the same time, a productive tension exists between the capacity of Hubble imagery to visualize a knowable universe and the uncertainty

that Smith insists upon in his poetry. Further distinguishing Smith's poetry from Hubble imagery is a sensitivity to the folly of the frontier impulse as it manifests itself in relation to Outer Space. Elsewhere in *Fireflies in the Magnolia Grove*, for instance, Smith imagines a point in the distant future where humanity has abandoned the planet in pursuit of a world "untainted by time," where none of the cycles that otherwise govern human existence remain. This act of abandonment is the product of wanting to leave "before evidence of disorder got out of hand," presumably at a point when human societies are on the verge of self-destructing and the planet itself has begun to dry to dust ("Windblown Dust" 2). What prevents this dystopic vision from feeling like an overly familiar sci-fi plot is the comic thoughtfulness of the "longsuffering, resourceful birds" to which humanity, in its rush towards extraterrestrial reinvention, has left the care of the Earth: "'It's a pity,'" Smith imagines the birds thinking, "'so talented a species should have lost nerve prematurely, with so many / biotic opportunities unexplored'" (3, 5-7). This instance of projected avian intelligence, hyperbolic though it may be, is nevertheless indicative of the way in which Smith imagines the natural world to provide a necessary wisdom that is, in his poetry at least, capable of countering humanity's myopic pursuits.

Without exaggerating the difference between them, it is therefore possible to recognize Smith's poetry and Hubble imagery as enabling two distinct visual experiences: whereas Hubble provides images of abundance that are readily accessible and that conform to aesthetic expectations, Smith presents a decidedly complex poetic that is deliberately inconclusive. Even so, it is nevertheless true, as MacLaine observes of Smith's poetry, that "the unexpected shifts and unpredictable ruptures always move towards a point of comfort, or, at least, revelation" (24). The presence of fireflies is one such "revelation," a transformative moment that rivals Blake in its vision. In *Milton*, for example, Blake conceives of a moment that "Renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed" (42-45). Similarly, Smith writes in *Strands the Length of the Wind* that "[a] moment like this can give identity / to a whole culture" ("The Wind Is" 6, 7). The power of the single moment to renovate "a whole culture" is helpful for understanding the conclusion to "The World: A Hypothesis," where Smith's closing metaphor locates the vitality of bioluminescent life in the depths of Space.

The very inhospitality of these depths, coupled with the stillness and silence that seem to hang over them, must explain to some degree why poets and artists feel compelled to animate them with movement and life. In the summer of 2014, the Japanese conceptual artist Azuma Makoto sent

a Bonsai tree and an arrangement of orchids, lilies, and hydrangeas into Outer Space. Balloons lifted the flora to a height of 30,000 metres as a series of high-resolution cameras chronicled their journey. The resulting ethereal images capture the vulnerability of organic matter in the isolation of Space. While Makoto coined the term “Exbiotanica” to describe the flora’s newfound alien existence, the images themselves are elegiac, since the fate of the plant life is so obvious, and because they render so clearly “the delicacy of life amid the harsh and vast beauty of the universe” (Kirkpatrick n. pag.). By literally relocating organic life into Space, Makoto succeeds in defamiliarizing it; the Bonsai tree is recognizable, yet suddenly strange in its new surroundings. The orchids, too, seem otherworldly, and so much so that viewers may ask why they were not immediately recognized as strange all along (86). Smith’s poetry, likewise, plays out in “a season of flowering / galaxies,” where rich tapestries of extraterrestrial light reveal the alien nature of flower and galaxy alike (“It’s Time to Talk” 12, 13).

These acts of making the familiar strange complicate the epistemological process of gathering information about the world, and not only because abrupt shifts in patterns of signification undermine the stable meaning of a sign, but also because defamiliarization calls attention to the extent to which a single object has the potential to disrupt our patterns of knowing and being. Part of what makes the familiar object alien, in other words, is its generally unacknowledged potential to hold meaning far in excess of what its size would otherwise suggest. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1992), Susan Stewart explores the possibility that a relationship exists between the scale of things and the perception of time. Stewart recounts an experiment conducted by the University of Tennessee’s School of Architecture in order to illustrate this possibility:

...researchers had adult subjects observe scale-model environments 1/6, 1/12, and 1/24 of full size. The environments represented lounges and included chipboard furniture as well as scale figures. The subjects were asked to move the scale figures through the environment, to imagine humans to be that scale, and to identify activities appropriate for that space. Then they were asked to imagine themselves to be of “lounge scale” and picture themselves engaging in activities in the lounge. Finally they were asked to tell researchers when they felt that they had been engaged in such activities for 30 minutes. The experiment showed that “the experience of temporal duration is compressed relative to the clock in the full-sized environment.” In other

words, 30 minutes would be experienced in 5 minutes at 1/12 scale and 2.5 minutes at 1/24 scale. (66)

Smith performs a similar experiment in “The World: A Hypothesis.” By presenting a cosmos in miniature, the poem renders the vast fathoms of Outer Space on a more manageable scale. While it may be difficult to calculate precisely what a firefly-to-galaxy field scale is, Smith’s act of miniaturization does provide at least some sense of what the infinite might look like, and how one might experience it, even if the model is only an imaginary one born of shared visual patterns. The perfectly arranged image nevertheless permits the poem to gesture towards expanding possibilities rather than being confined to lyrical closure. As Ian Bogost writes in *Alien Phenomenology* (2012), “[t]he ontological equivalent of the Big Bang rests within every object” (26). Bogost’s concept of “tiny ontologies” is useful for understanding the image of the exbiotanical fireflies that appear at the end of “The World: A Hypothesis,” since they, too, are tiny ontologies, small in size and yet capable of containing within them the vast mysteries of the universe. Worth considering at length here is the nature of this potential, which poets have long imagined the firefly to possess.

A Language of Light: Towards a Firefly Poetic

Even though its lifespan is less than one summer, a firefly’s luminescence survives much longer in memory, perhaps in part because its appearance coincides with what William Arrowsmith once called “the last poised enchantment of the dusk” (228). Within such pastoral conceptualizations of evening, the gloaming hours form a temporary, potentially elegiac station in time and space, one where “the day-world [is] still visible,” even though “the night-world [is] moving in” (228). This transition, while perhaps somewhat ominous in its capacity to bring to mind the unrelenting passage of time, has nevertheless long been understood to serve as a site of rest and reprieve, where more leisurely forms of reflection are possible. In his reading of William Collins’s “Ode to Evening,” for example, Geoffrey Hartman points out that evening lends itself particularly well to any number of Romantic tendencies, not the least of which is the appreciation of crepuscular calmness as an alternative to the commotion of the day (320-21). Fireflies arrive in this realm, earthly cousins of the distant stars, offering a sense of continuity between a sky dotted with remote starlight and what is otherwise familiar terrain. “Here come real stars to fill the upper skies,” writes Robert Frost, “And here on earth come emulating flies, / That though they never equal stars in size, / ... Achieve at times a very star-like start” (“Fireflies in the Garden” 1-4).

An appreciation for the similarities between bioluminescence and celestial light is by no means limited to poets. In *The Universe at Midnight* (2001), the American astronomer Ken Croswell speculates that the Cepheid Variable stars “must have resembled cosmic fireflies” to the astronomers who first observed them (28). “If Eta Aquilae and Delta Cephei were individual fireflies blinking on and off,” he writes, “the Magellanic Clouds hosted a firefly nest” (28). While perhaps fanciful, Croswell’s imagery is nevertheless instructive. The Cepheids are, as Carolyn Collins Petersen and John C. Brandt explain, “standard candles,” or celestial objects whose “intrinsic brightness changes over periods of time ranging from 1 to 50 days,” thus enabling astronomers to measure distance in Space (163). While the flash patterns of fireflies change far more quickly, they still manage to grant perspective over space. Standard candles of another sort, their ephemeral nature locates them in a category of spectral phenomena that Rei Terada has classified as producing “perceptions that seem below or marginal to normal appearance” (3). As Terada explains in *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (2009), “one needs particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences... to figure the possibility of fleeting relief from the pressure to endorse what Kant calls the world ‘as is’” (3, 4). The attraction to “marginal” sources of light, therefore, may be in part the result of the desire to grant oneself temporary leave from conventional patterns of being and thinking: to watch fireflies is to become receptive to other ways of knowing and feeling that are not made possible by the empirical encounter. In this sense, ephemeral visual phenomena such as fireflies are standard candles for desires and emotions that are common to many, yet remain difficult to describe.

On a more practical level, the longstanding appeal of fireflies owes at least some debt to their social nature. Entirely unlike the nightmare of isolation and alienation to which Gregor Samsa awakes, they are communities of flashing light whose bioluminescence renders visible their nightly dramas. Distant cousins to the beetles that were worshipped by ancient Egyptians, fireflies have long been associated with the celestial and the sacred (Cambefort 201). Similar to the butterfly and the moth, which, as Eric C. Brown points out in the Introduction to *Insect Poetics*, “have long been seen as representations of the soul freed from its mortal casing,” the firefly can signify equally the soul’s journey in the afterlife and the burning passions of youth (xi). “Its many poetic associations,” writes David Landis Barnhill of the *hotaru* in Matsuo Basho’s haiku, “include passionate love, the spirits of the dead, and a poor Chinese scholar who studied by the glow of fireflies” (271). In Richard Lemm’s “Spark,” a single firefly is “called /

by a voice full of flame / to help keep the great lights / burning” (10-13). An elegy for a lost infant, the brief poem concludes with a widening sense of perspective made possible by “a sky full of fireflies” that are “so distant” and yet “so near” (13, 14). What begins in loss ends with an image of community. Again, the firefly is recruited to stand in for the fleeting spirit as it assumes its place in “the night field” beyond (6). Poems such as these use the iconography of the natural world as a means of imaginatively navigating the unknown territory of life after death, and as a method of comforting those who are left behind. These fireflies can, however, also prove haunting, especially for those who cannot relinquish them to the “great lights” beyond.

Sadly, the firefly’s natural habitat has increasingly become an imaginary one, insofar as its human counterparts have compromised the diurnal cycle of day and night to such an extent that the darkness on which it relies for communication and reproduction has been permanently altered. Within urban settings, the very marginality of firefly populations must in some way contribute to their attractiveness. Insofar as their rustic nature enlivens and enchants the cityscape, fireflies appear to open up zones of picturesque contemplation and possibility within the familiar and the mundane. Those who observe them firsthand come to appreciate that they are not simply the subject of poetry, but that they possess the ability to communicate in their own right. The sixteen species common to North America each possess a distinct flash pattern; the night field, as Dr. Sara Lewis has explained, is a polyglot space in which various species announce themselves in patterns of extended or abbreviated flashes (Zimmer D1). An expert in the language of each species, Lewis is among those who not only replicate these patterns, but also communicate in a meaningful way with these insects. It is possible, therefore, that the firefly’s longstanding place in poetry owes at least some debt to its own mastery of a language of light to which poets, however intuitively, have long considered themselves privy.

“The fate of our times,” Max Weber stated in a lecture entitled “Science as Vocation,” “is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155). In its capacity to combine “intellectualization” and enchanting images such as fireflies, Smith’s poetry seems to render preemptive Weber’s lament for a world resigned to impersonality of empirical truth, although saying so risks underestimating the complexity of Weber’s observation.⁴ Even so, between Slavoj Žižek’s dismissal of enchantment as “late modern nostalgia” that “soften[s] the trauma of the Real,” and John Milbank’s insistence that the augmentation of material reality is a necessity of the human con-

dition, Smith's poetry plays out in its own intellectual and imaginative space (Robinette 96). As a close reading of "The World: A Hypothesis" reveals, Smith's universe is one in which the enchantment of fireflies can still linger at various proximities, and where observers are free to speculate on what they may or may not mean.

A Cyclic Universe: John Smith's Enchanted Return

As if to foreshadow the appearance of fireflies at the end of the poem, Smith begins "The World: A Hypothesis" with an instance of iridescent light. "The world blicked into being three minutes ago," Smith writes; "Thanks / very much" (1, 2). His use of the archaic verb "blick" brings the world gleaming into being, as though forged in a metallurgic fire.⁵ The appearance of the phrase "Thanks very much" is one of the "coy ironies and farcically authoritative pronouncements" that Zach Wells (2010) has identified as sources of humour and of gentle satire in Smith's poetry. The phrase exudes an ironic confidence in its own accuracy, one that the second half of the poem will go to great lengths to complicate. Significant, too, is the use of the word "world" over "planet," the former evoking an inhabited, autonomous milieu: one that is the sum of its parts, human and non-human, topographical and geographic, atmospheric and geologic. It is, as well, a site of human interaction, of culture, and of civilization, all of which underscores the arbitrary length of Smith's Genesis: why three minutes? Why not two? Or four? The creation of the world takes, according the speaker's opening declaration, roughly the length of one pop song. The poem then extends this logic to the passage of time, thereby accelerating processes that otherwise take years, generations, millennia, and even eons to unfold:

... Everybody comes loaded with a memory file
of what they are persuaded they did before that time. Historical
documents rank up in instant order. Libraries leap to fame

fully stocked. Fossil strata promptly presume to lie emplaced
as though a phalanx of dinosaurs dropped dead at the K/T
boundary. Quasars would have us believe they switched on 10¹⁰
years previous. And all makes busy rushing apart
at the Hubble rate ...

(2-9)

Smith's allusion to "the Hubble rate" evokes the series of discoveries that Edwin Hubble made in the 1920s pertaining to both the size and the

expanding nature of the universe. As Peterson and Brandt explain, Hubble observed that the “spectra of galaxies generally showed redshifts,” or “spectral lines [that] appeared to be shifted to red or longer wavelengths. . . . From this observation, the idea of the ‘expanding universe’ was established” (165). The quotidian nature of this “rushing apart” brings to the world an unsettling sense of order: human memory is stocked like supermarket shelves, historical documents are instantaneous, and libraries appear complete before their patrons. What these three instances of collapsed time have in common is that they do away with the necessity of experience; people have instead bootable identities that presumably prepare them for a civilization ready made for their consumption.

While the notion of the memory file in “The World: A Hypothesis” is dystopic and computational, a Lyotardian scenario in which human thought has been replaced with binary code,⁶ the concept carries a very different meaning elsewhere in Smith’s poetry. *Midnight Found You Dancing* makes reference to memory files in the prose epigraph to the collection, as though they were the subject of an archaeological expedition: “As we dug deeper into the memory files,” Smith writes, “we came upon a cluster of interrelated circulates, some of which we were able partially to decode” (6). The dig seems to take place in a distant future where the memory files have been reclaimed by the Earth; these files, while partially obscured, nevertheless intrigue those who go in search of them, at least in part because they recognize themselves in the information they contain. “What we heard was both strange and familiar,” Smith writes in the untitled piece, “like something we ourselves might have said long ago, half-waking, on a planet close to our origin and in a primitive language that could have been a precursor to our own” (6).

The memory file passage that appears *Midnight Found You Dancing* weaves together a number of themes present in “The World: A Hypothesis.” Using the past tense, the speaker recalls a discovery that occurred at some unknown date, one whose findings were suggestive yet uncertain. The memory files, in this case, contain within them a primitive form of communication spoken by a people from a neighbouring planet who may (or may not) be humanity’s ancestors. Excised from any context that otherwise would explain its meaning, the passage reads like a fragment from a future-past, one that advances us into a possible future only to discover that clues to our identity are now only faintly present. The speaker’s lament for a primitive language that is both “strange and familiar” is reminiscent of a passage in *Strands the Length of the Wind*, where Smith imagines a future where signs of humanity are difficult to detect: “In a million years,”

he writes, “hardly a trace / will remain of the roads and their makers” (12, 13). Again, Smith’s poetry moves us through time and space in order to imagine a point in the future where human civilizations have fallen, and where their archaeological remnants cannot be counted on to recall their history. It is as if Smith is writing a postmodern version of P.B. Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” one in which readers encounter not only the inevitable decline of civilizations, but also where time’s passage is no longer easily traced in the material world.

While perhaps also broadly reminiscent of the Dadaist fascination with primitivism, Smith’s emphasis on this early culture feels less like an attempt to challenge the ubiquity of rationalism as it does an attempt to evoke the concept of eternal reoccurrence. According to Nietzsche, the infinite nature of time, in combination with the finite patterns in which events can occur, inevitably results in endless patterns of repetition.⁷ Nietzsche’s nightmare of eternal repetition finds only fleeting reprieve in the “metaphysical comfort...that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 59). For Nietzsche, “this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in...a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations” (59). Smith’s fireflies in “The World: A Hypothesis” may well be a “chorus of natural beings” who appear “eternally the same,” but there is no indication that they emerge out of anything like the crippling despair that necessitate Nietzsche’s creatures, nor is their task to rejoice in the power of tragedy (59).

The opening stanzas of “The World: A Hypothesis” are nevertheless unsettling. History and memory, along with terrestrial and cosmic signifiers of a changing planet and universe, have been wrenched loose from their status as chronological time keepers. This imagery seems to challenge the linearity of time, and, therefore, to suggest that an accelerated cyclical pattern is unfolding. The speaker claims that fossils have foregone the slow process of absorption into strata and have “promptly presume[d]” their place as though choreographed by a single cataclysmic event. At this point in the poem, the speaker exudes a strong distrust of the visual: dubious of quasars that insist on their age, time, as a phenomenon that manifests itself in observable entities, is called into question. Within the trajectory of the poem, the speaker appears willing to explore the possibility that this arrangement is liberating:

...Whatever else it does,
the arrangement serves one end: to help us achieve
detachment, float free, realize the whole of the past

no more than a few digits jotted on an envelope,
and the future no more than more of the same,
cosmos a mote of dust in the eye, mind

a bouquet of aromatic molecules snuffed
in the nasal tract, and the inner life a cosy
enigmatic vacuole awaiting inclusions or occlusion.
(9-17)

In these stanzas, the immensity of an expanding universe has reduced the past to a “few digits,” which could be read here as either a postal code, or perhaps as arithmetic performed on scrap paper in passing. Existence itself has become a dust mote, and “the inner life” otherwise devoted to contemplating vast mysteries is nothing more than a cavity located inside a cell that is “awaiting” what the circulatory system may deliver. The emphasis on the capacity of the molecular to contain the whole of being foreshadows the poem’s ending, where fireflies announce themselves as tiny ontologies in which “[b]eing expands” (Bogost 26). Not content with the trajectory of his thought experiment, Smith interrupts this air of cerebral detachment and Zen resignation with a meditation on the role of the self in the conception of the world:

—No. Stop.

It wasn’t three minutes ago. It’s always
the splittest second before you ask, or before you
think of asking, or before you don’t know
what it is—but there’s something—you need to ask.
(18-22)

Smith’s world is immanent in collective inquisitiveness. The world returns eternally not through language, but through the relentless curiosity of its inhabitants who, according to Smith, are undeterred by its endlessly reoccurring nature. As Smith writes in his poem “This One,” “[t]he universe remains too flickering or too / ingenious” for us ever to grasp fully its workings (3, 4). And yet, even if we “don’t know / what it is,” we are bound by our “need to ask” (21, 22).

Precisely because of this sense of shared curiosity and need, at the very moment at which “The World: A Hypothesis” articulates one of its most challenging concepts, it is also at its most inviting. The use of the second person in this stanza is a dramatic reversal of the previous stanza’s characterization of selfhood, insofar as it encourages a sense of agency on the reader’s behalf. The speaker assumes a shared “need” for the pursuit of knowledge with his audience; his or her outlook is empathetic and communal in that it encourages participation in a common intellectual enterprise. The strategy of slowing the poem’s deliberation by isolating an imperative (“No. Stop”) repeats at the outset of the final stanza:

Look.

At lightspeed the nightfield deepens, and we plunge
outward towards origin, scrolling back through time’s
aggrandizing entropy. Look there. Now you see them.
Now. You don’t. Fireflies. In the magnolia grove.

(23-27)

The isolation of the word “Now” in this final line enables it to be read both as an evocation of the time, as a call-to-action, and perhaps even as an incomplete statement of consequence. The phrase “You don’t,” meanwhile, becomes something more than simply a reversal of the previous statement’s position; it is a blunt negation of individual capability, one whose monosyllabic plainness stands out among lines and phrases that are otherwise ornate. Read in relation to the conventional syntax of the previous line, the inability to see what the speaker describes here may well encapsulate the brevity of being, or perhaps the impossibility of envisioning the far reaches of Space.

“Infinity has no physical manifestation,” observe Marcia Birken and Anne C. Coon in *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry* (2008), “it can only be imagined” (180). Unlike William Blake, who desired to see infinity in the “the palm of your hand,” Smith makes the heavens known in the fireflies that appear and then disappear in “time’s aggrandizing entropy” (“Auguries of Innocence” 3). The allusion to entropy⁸ risks losing the reader at a crucial point in the poem, but the concept itself contributes much to this final scene. As Paul Steinhardt explains in “The Cyclic Universe,” “every cycle of expansion and contraction creates entropy through natural thermodynamic processes, which adds to the entropy from earlier cycles” (381). As a result, at the beginning of each new cycle, “there is higher entropy density than the cycle before” (381). A competing theory

of the Big Bang model, the cyclic model proposes that both the universe and time are endless. Steinhardt offers this explanation: “the universe,” he writes, “goes through periods of evolution from hot to cold, from dense to under-dense, from hot radiation to the structure we see today, and eventually to an empty universe. Then, a sequence of events occurs that cause the cycle to begin again” (380). As this endless process unfolds, the passage of time “aggrandizes,” or simply increases, the density of entropy. Meanwhile, the “nightfield deepens” because dark matter accumulates at a greater rate as the expansion of the universe accelerates (380-81).⁹ Thus, Smith’s allusion is to a cyclic universe without beginning or end in which losses accumulate. It is worth noting, however, that the poem scrolls back through time, perhaps challenging these inevitabilities as it maintains its journey outwards.

The final lines of “The World: A Hypothesis” are, in fact, a complete inversion of the certain statement that opens the poem. The imagery that Smith offers is inconclusive, a scene without resolution, but one that is rich with possibilities nonetheless. In Smith’s fireflies, readers may see galaxies in the gravitational curvature of Space: illuminated visitors announcing themselves in the garden of time, in Dante’s souls, and in Basho’s lamp-light. The choice of the magnolia plant may seem like an arbitrary signifier of the pastoral that has been randomly inserted to enhance the fireflies’ enchantment, but it is, in fact, carefully chosen. “*Magnolia Stellata in bloom / on a clear moonless night,*” writes Smith in *Midnight Found You Dancing* (5, 6). “What and By Whom,” in which these lines appear, is a love poem, “an old story” of a lover writing to his beloved. The *Magnolia Stellata*, or star-shaped magnolia, is an image in a poem that the speaker imagines his lover might read, one that will draw her to a window where they may share the same views: “My curtains blow / on a similar breeze,” the speaker observes, “with fireflies for flowers or stars” (5-7). Smith’s allusions to physics, cellular biology, and astronomy can obscure these moments in his writing that are born of familiar forms of longing. The song of reply that the speaker hopes for is “delicate,” a kind of music made from the bones of the dead. Human existence, both fleeting and fragile, is nevertheless the source of improvised song that retains the potential to overcome great distances. Similarly, the firefly tableau that Smith sees in the “magnolia grove” of Space matches—and perhaps even exceeds—the most powerful CCD camera¹⁰ in its capacity to visualize what otherwise requires a team of scientists and a Space Telescope to realize; the metaphor brings the infinite near while resisting the finality that an astrophotograph represents.

“All photographs are *memento mori*,” Susan Sontag famously argues in *On Photography* (1977). “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it,” Sontag observes, “all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (15). While perhaps never intended as such, Hubble astrographs are *vanitas* images of a sort, insofar as they reveal the immensity of the cosmos and the corresponding smallness of Earthly existence. The closing image of Smith’s “The World: A Hypothesis” could also be read as *memento mori*, except that the fireflies seem so at home in both realms. They appear, too, at an originary point, so it is unclear whether they are the metamorphosed souls of humanity, or humanity’s origins in the depths of Space. The temporality of the poem remains open to both possibilities while precluding any certainty as to which is more likely. Yet Smith’s poetry is remarkable for this very reason. As MacLaine observes, Smith’s “search for a sacred space is a delicate and uncertain business” (26). The fireflies, too, are delicate and uncertain, not unlike the fate of humanity as it rides on the back of a planet travelling one thousand miles per hour through a universe that has only begun to reveal itself.

Readers who desire a simultaneity of possibilities will find in Smith’s outlook an open poetic that stretches in multiple directions. His “strands the length of the wind” offer extended, thoughtful deliberations that refute the intellectual dilution of an age where public discourse has been reduced to the pithiness of social media. As such, Smith’s work helps shake loose the notion that Canadian poetry must conform to the instantly recognizable sentiment. His poems are instead rewarding in the long term: they ask more of their readers by requiring them to surrender their firm grasp on certainty in favour of prolonged inquisitiveness, but they also ultimately give more in return. They offer, as well, the relatively rare opportunity to appreciate the warmth and humanity of scientific thought: Smith’s fireflies are, at once, a glimpse into the depths of a cyclic universe where new light is just beginning to appear, and a reminder that such lights inevitably blink and fade from view. Their rich semantic flight path through poetry has seen them hold aloft the idea of life after death, and, in so doing, fireflies have made the concept of eternal continuity an enchanted one. As Smith reminds us, it is both a privilege and a responsibility to follow their lead, and to be “amazed by so much in so little” (“All that is Left” 14).

Notes

- 1 The P.E.I. Poet Laureate Program was founded in 2002 “to celebrate Prince Edward Island and its people, to raise the profile of Prince Edward Island poets and poetry in general, to promote a higher standard of literacy, and to provide for the expression culture of and heritage through the literary arts” (“About the Provincial Poet Laureate Program” n.pag.). Smith held the position from 2002 to 2004.
- 2 Even though Smith does not name specific places in his poetry, there are nevertheless signs of Prince Edward Island’s landscape in his writing. The geographical equivalent to his “open mosaic” is a continuous coastline, and the winds that figure so prominently in *Strands the Length of the Wind* (1993) are one of the province’s defining characteristics (*Strands* back cover). Arguably, to inhabit a place poetically, as Smith has for decades, is to permit the characteristics of that place to play a role in authoring your work.
- 3 In “Never Mind the Streets of Paris: An Introduction to John Smith,” I recount a conversation in which Smith told me that, “[i]n the wake of the atomic bomb, ... the study of physics was understood as a way of coming to terms with the violent truth of the century. To write poetry was to pursue this knowledge as well, but to do so outside the framework of power that made such violence possible” (Hickey 3).
- 4 As Bruce Robbins observes, even though Weber’s famous allusion to Frederick Schiller did introduce the term “disenchantment” into critical discourse as a means of coming to terms with a modern world that is devoid of magic, Schiller and Weber actually had very different definitions of “disenchantment” in mind. For Schiller, disenchantment described the de-divinization of the world: “die entgötterte Natur,” or “A Nature shorn of the divine” (Schiller qtd. in Taylor 317). Schiller’s lament is not only for the declining interest in polytheism, but also a requiem for the natural environs that were once understood to play host to the gods (Robbins 75). Weber, on the other hand, had already argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that religion was itself responsible for the elimination of magic from the world (Robbins 75). Monotheistic forms of worship, therefore, cannot claim to be victims of disenchantment because they themselves were, according to Weber, responsible for its realization (Weber *The Protestant Ethic* 60).
- 5 The *OED* also provides an entry for the verb *blik*, which is to “shine, glisten, glitter” (“blik”). The verb appears to have fallen from use by sixteenth century. *Blick* was, however, used as a noun in the nineteenth century to describe “the brightening or iridescence appearing on silver or gold at the end of the cupelling or refining process” (“Blick”). Neither entry has been updated since 1887.
- 6 Lyotard articulates the concept of computerization at length in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, and then later in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, where he conceives of thought as a type of software that is loaded onto the hardware of the mind (8-23).
- 7 Nietzsche certainly does not have a monopoly on the concept of the eternal return, as it remains common among any number of Eastern cultures and religions. The thought experiment itself grows from his reading of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose particular brand of idealism was considerably more life affirming. Still, the concept is of central importance to Nietzsche’s philosophy and consistently associated with his writing. In *The Gay Science*, he theorizes that “... time is infinite, but the things in time, the concrete bodies are finite ... Now, however long a time may pass, according to the eternal laws governing the combinations of this eternal play of repetition, all configurations that have previously existed on this earth must yet meet, attract, repulse, kiss, and corrupt each other again . . . And thus it will happen one day that a man will be born again, just like me . . .” (*GS* 16).

- 8 As Don S. Lemons explains, “[entropy’s] chief function in thermodynamics is to quantify the irreversibility of a thermodynamic process” (1). Entropy is generally understood to occur in a predictable fashion, in much the same way that steam irreversibly rises from a cup of tea as it cools.
- 9 “[T]he expansion of the universe is speeding up,” Steinhardt observes. “This means that most of the energy of the universe is neither matter nor radiation. Rather, another form of energy has overtaken the matter and radiation. For lack of a better term, this new energy is called dark energy. Dark energy, unlike the matter and radiation we’re familiar with, is gravitationally self-repulsive. That’s why it causes the expansion to speed up rather than slow down” (385).
- 10 According to Steve B. Howell, the capacity of charge-coupled devices to produce images that are virtually noise-free has made them essential tools for astronomers seeking to capture images of the universe (5).

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