

# The Universe as Primal Scream



## SUMMARY

At exactly 5 p.m. the children upstairs start letting out screams—high-pitched, piercing, and harsh. The boy starts screaming first, and then his sister joins him. Once in a while, they both start screaming at the same time, and I consider putting on my shoes and going upstairs to check if this is just some kind of test that their parents have been running on their expensive crystal glassware—which, given that the sound is so piercing, definitely must have shattered into a fine dust all over the floor.

Perhaps their mother is still pleased by the power of her children's lungs, which she nursed to strength. Maybe if they scream loudly enough and hit the right note, the entire apartment building will leave the ground and rise up to heaven like the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament. If this is what the children are aiming for with their screams, then let the sky change color—turning from blue, to red, to fiery gold, to black. Let the heaven that has been passed down to us come closer.

Let heaven come closer, whether this means encountering dead people dressed in clothing from the Old Testament, or simply finding a door that opens into the churning vastness of outer space. Let heaven come closer, whether it bows and welcomes us like a father or burns us up like an incinerator. I'm ready to encounter the forces of the universe that make it impossible to hold onto anything for very long. The universe gives us good things only to make us bend over with grief and loss. The universe is a sorcerer but also a thief, an enormous wind that knocks over our mirrors and ends our lives like dust being swept away.

How small and crude our own noise and business seems alongside these mysterious forces—noises like my stereo playing different songs and my neighbor cutting onions on the other side of the wall. All of these everyday sounds are just a blip in comparison with the unknowable forces of the universe, which might never come to collect us. Upstairs the children are still screaming as though it's the beginning of human civilization. They are screaming as though something they can't explain is insisting on coming into the world.

exact same time each day, just for the sake of screaming. The description of their screaming is comedic at first, but it leads the speaker to the profound idea that beneath the codes and conventions of modern society exist other, more fundamental forces that human beings don't fully understand. Everyday life, the poem implies, is small and inconsequential in comparison to the mysterious, awe-inspiring power and vastness of the universe.

The speaker interprets the children's shrieks as them essentially channeling this "primal" force—as them expressing something fundamentally chaotic or overwhelming about existence. Perhaps children are especially tuned into this force because they're less versed in social norms and expectations than adults; whatever the reason, the speaker sees their "shrill and metallic" cries as something immensely powerful, verging on them channeling something divine. If they hit the right note, the speaker imagines, the sound will cause the entire apartment building to lift off into heaven and everyone in the building to rise "to glory" like the prophet Elijah did in the Bible.

Although the speaker doesn't know why, exactly, the children are screaming, it's clear that this intense sound lifts the speaker out of the confines of everyday life and connects people to some raw force that runs through the universe. This isn't necessarily a comforting thought, however. Although the speaker imagines that the screams will lead to a sort of transcendent religious experience, the speaker *also* suggests that the children's voices evoke the "roiling infinity of space"—an image that paints the universe as both violent and impossibly vast, implying that the powerful and primal force that lurks in the children's screaming might not be all that welcoming to human beings themselves.

To that end, the speaker links the force to the passage of time, declaring a desire to "meet" whatever it is that "refuses to let us keep anything / For long"—that is, to meet whatever it is that makes time pass and whatever it is that "sweep[s] our short lives clean" (erasing people's existence). This force also makes a mess of human knowledge, "knock[ing]" [symbolic](#) "mirrors to the floor" and rendering the small noises and ordinary routines of daily life a mere "racket."

Again, then, the screams alert the speaker to the comparative smallness of human lives, making all of humanity seem inconsequential in the face of the vast and unknowable universe. Although it's difficult to fully make sense of the children's screaming, the speaker senses that they are trying to address something raw and essential about the nature of existence itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:



## THEMES



### THE MYSTERY AND VASTNESS OF THE UNIVERSE

In "The Universe as Primal Scream," the speaker describes hearing two young children scream loudly, at the

- Lines 1-34



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*5pm on the ...  
... shrill and metallic.*

The title of the poem lets the reader know that the poem will be about some fundamental force within the universe. The word “primal” refers to something elemental, essential, or basic, and can also refer to early stages in human development (as in the term “primates”). The word “scream” at the end of the title suggests that this primal or fundamental force has been unleashed in some way. Taken altogether, then, the title—“The Universe as Primal Scream”—implies that the poem will be a kind of portrait of the universe, exploring what is most primal, basic, or fundamental within it.

As the poem begins, the reader realizes that the “primal scream” referenced in the title is an *actual* scream (or screams) that the speaker hears on a daily basis at 5:00 p.m., loosed by an unnamed “they.” The phrase “on the nose” is an [idiom](#) that simply means “exactly” and adds a bit of humor to the poem by suggesting that the chaotic, “primal” force has a strict schedule.

This scream is not pleasant, but rather “high, shrill, and metallic.” In other words, it’s loud, high-pitched, and harsh. It roll[s] out” of “their” mouths, a [metaphor](#) comparing the sound of the scream to water or some other physical substance that can wash over its surroundings. The [consonance](#) of the /l/ sound in “rolls,” “shrill,” and “metallic” evokes that liquid motion of the scream.

### LINES 3-5

*First the boy, ...  
... up and see*

The speaker makes clear who, exactly, is screaming: two children, and more specifically a brother and sister. Usually the brother gets things going, but sometimes they both start screaming at the same time. These details make it clear that the speaker is very used to this happening.

It also becomes clear that these children live above the speaker, since the speaker sometimes considers putting on shoes to “go up” to see what’s happening. This detail suggests that the speaker is in an apartment building and hears this sound coming from an upstairs apartment.

The lighthearted, conversational tone that began in the poem’s first lines continues here, as the speaker uses phrases like “let loose” to describe the sound of the screaming. This term is casual and [colloquial](#), sustaining the comic quality of the speaker’s language while also [metaphorically](#) suggesting that

the children are unleashing some kind of powerful force. The laid-back quality of the language indicates that there’s nothing actually *wrong* with the children; rather, they scream for the sake of screaming, or perhaps to express some primal quality that the surrounding adults can’t quite understand.

In comparison to the short sentences that make up the poem’s first two lines (“5pm on the [...] and metallic”), this section features a longer sentence that stretches from the end of line 3 to the end of line 5:

[...] Occasionally,  
They both let loose at once, and I think  
Of putting on my shoes to go up and see

The [enjambment](#) that occurs at the end of line 4 between the words “think” and “Of” creates a sense of increased urgency and speed within the poem. This propels readers from one line to the next as both the poem—and, by extension, the scream it describes—builds in intensity.

### LINES 6-9

*Whether it is ...  
... on the floor.*

The speaker imagines going upstairs to find out whether this daily screaming is “merely an experiment” that the children’s parents have been “conducting / Upon the good crystal.” This imagined experiment is a joke on the speaker’s part, since only *incredibly* loud sounds are actually capable of breaking glass. This idea indicates just how loud the sound seems to the speaker, intensifying the description and presenting the children’s voices as nearly unbearable.

These lines contain with several instances of [enjambment](#):

Whether it is merely an experiment  
Their parents have been conducting  
Upon the good crystal, which must surely  
Lie shattered to dust on the floor.

All the above lines are enjambed except for the last one, as the speaker comes to an [end-stop](#) after the word “floor.” These moments of enjambment move the reader quickly through the lines, implying that even though the speaker is describing this noise in a lighthearted way, there is still an intensity to it that also occurs within the poem—a sense of urgency that builds and will eventually lead to something else.

Several sound effects emphasize this intensity and the audible power of the children’s voices. First, the [alliterative](#) hard /c/ sounds in “conducting” and “crystal” emphasize the sharp quality of the children’s screams, since they cut through the air the way crystal or glass would. The word “conducting” could also be read as an [ironic pun](#), since the speaker implies that the parents are “conducting” an experiment, but also suggests that

they are “conducting” the screams as a musical conductor would a symphony.

Additionally, the [consonant](#) /st/ sound occurs in “crystal” and “dust,” creating a sound that is reminiscent of the sound glass might make while shattering. The same can be said for the alliterative /sh/ sounds that connect “surely” and “shattered.”

After this long description, which has stretched a single sentence over seven lines (“Occasionally [...] dust on the floor”), the stanza ends with a full-stop. The intensity that has been building temporarily pauses—though the sound of the screaming, the speaker implies, has not paused at all.

## LINES 10-12

*Maybe the mother ...  
... To such might.*

In a tongue-in-cheek way, the speaker suggests that perhaps the children's mother encourages the children to scream like this in order to show off just how powerful their lungs are. This image of the “four pink lungs” is vivid. It reinforces the sense of something “primal” within the screaming, connecting the children to their animal nature. The joking quality of this possibility, though, also reinforces the sense that there's nothing wrong with the children—they don't scream out of pain or fear. Rather, they scream to express some kind of fundamental need or force, something that is basic or elemental to their “primal” nature.

By mentioning the act of nursing, the speaker also associates the children with a youthful kind of innocence, hinting that one of the reasons they scream without reservation is that they haven't yet been socialized to *not* do such a thing. Whereas adults might want to scream but won't let themselves, children are more fully connected to the “primal” urge to do this and thus more likely to act on it.

The speaker uses [alliteration](#) once again in this section, as the /p/ sound in “proud” and “pink” connects the two words. This draws extra attention to the word “proud,” subtly emphasizing the idea that the mother might be proud of her children for screaming so loudly. This implies that there is something almost wholesome about their shrieking, as if they should be admired for their willingness to cry out with a sense of reckless abandon that adults are unable to muster. On a more basic level, this alliteration simply gives the language a pleasant sound that carries readers through the poem.

## LINES 12-15

*Perhaps, if they ...  
... Like Elijah.*

The poem begins to turn in the second half of line 13, as the speaker imagines what might happen if the children hit some “magic decibel” (a decibel is a measurement of sound) then “the whole building / Will lift-off, and we'll ride to glory / Like Elijah.”

In these lines, the speaker [alludes](#) to the prophet Elijah. According to the Biblical narrative, Elijah was carried into heaven in a chariot of fire. The speaker implies that the screaming children are *also* prophets. If they scream loudly enough, the apartment building as a whole might “lift-off”—just like Elijah—and ascend to heaven (i.e., “to glory”).

Until this point, the speaker has described the children's screams as high-pitched and shrill. But this portrayal begins to shift in this section, as the speaker implies that the “primal” aspect of the screaming is somehow prophetic. This screaming, the speaker intimates, connects everyone in the apartment building to a larger power that will lift them out of their daily lives and into heaven (or some other cosmic space).

Through this allusion to the prophet Elijah, then, the poem suggests that the primal quality of the children's screaming is linked to something larger in the universe as a whole, connecting it to the same force that has given rise to ancient religious narratives and visions.

The speaker's allusion to Elijah's ascent also includes a [simile](#), as the speaker says that the entire apartment building might “ride to glory like Elijah” if the children yell loudly enough. This suggests that the building will lift off in a way *similar* to Elijah, though not *exactly* like the prophet. This simile tempers this otherwise grandiose idea and helps sustain the grounded, [colloquial tone](#) of the poem. This imagined scenario could still be read as comic—emphasizing just how loud the screams are—even as it begins to introduce another, more profound element into the poem.

The poem's [diction](#) here begins to shift. The speaker merges a [colloquial](#), everyday tone with biblical language, using indecisive words like “perhaps” alongside more triumphant, poetic phrases like “ride to glory.” The experience the speaker describes *also* seems to bridge these two worlds, as the children's screams connect the world of everyday life to a greater and more powerful kind of existence.

Several sound effects help emphasize the poem's tonal and thematic shift. For instance, the [assonant](#) long /i/ sound in the phrase “ride to glory / like Elijah” calls attention to the idea that the speaker and the other people in the apartment building might lift off toward heaven like a divine prophet. At the same time, the /m/ sound in “magic” echoes the /m/ sound in the word “might,” which appears in line 12 (“To such might [...] they hit”). This [alliteration](#) links the children's “might[y]” lungs to “magic,” suggesting that they're capable of creating a powerful force that exists both within and beyond themselves.

## LINES 15-18

*If this is ...  
... we inherit approach.*

The speaker suggests that the children's screams are an attempt to *invoke* or *call forth* heaven (or some other greater

power). If this is what they are trying to do, the speaker says, then let it happen.

The speaker uses [imagery](#) that presents the sky changing color as though at sunset. Yet the speaker also uses terms that directly invoke the fire with which Elijah was carried into heaven—the word "molten," for instance, refers to fiery gold. At the same time, the shift to "black" suggests a kind of end of the earth, or of the world as we know it, implying that the approach of this greater power or fundamental force could feel apocalyptic.

Yet the speaker embraces this force, saying, "Let the heaven we inherit approach." This line suggests that the speaker believes heaven is something "we inherit" as human beings, implying that it is something *all* human beings will encounter sooner or later. Meanwhile, the speaker's use of the phrase "let it" sounds almost prophetic itself, as though the speaker has joined in on the children's invocation of heaven to help them beckon it closer.

In line 15, the speaker uses [anaphora](#) to build intensity and emphasis:

[...] If this is it—if this is what

The [repetition](#) of "If this is" reinforces the sense that the speaker doesn't know the exact purpose of the children's screaming. It also suggests that the speaker doesn't know what, exactly, the screams will summon. That primal power, then, remains fundamentally mysterious. At the same time, this anaphora imbues the lines with a repetitive rhythm that has a certain prayer-like quality to it, shifting the poem from the [colloquial](#), joking language of its opening to something both more somber and more urgent.

Meanwhile, the [alliterative](#) and [consonant](#) hard /c/ sounds appear several times in lines 16 through 18:

Their cries are cocked toward—let the sky  
Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold,  
To black. [...]

The sounds of "cries" and "cocked" are echoed in the sounds of "sky" and "black," reinforcing the connection of the children's screaming to some more primal or fundamental power within the universe as a whole, including the vastness of the sky and of outer space.

While the imagery and [diction](#) build in intensity, the poem itself slows down. The last two lines of the stanza are [end-stopped](#):

Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold,  
To black. Let the heaven we inherit approach.

The comma at the end of "gold" inserts a pause between the

two lines, and then there's a full stop after the word "approach," giving the entire stanza conclusive sound. As in the first stanza ("5pm on the [...] on the floor"), this stanza began with [enjambment](#), propelling readers forward and increasing the intensity of the poem. But the stanza ends by slowing readers down again, creating pauses that *also* intensify the speaker's meaning by creating anticipation and suggesting that something else is yet to emerge.

## LINES 19-22

*Whether it is ...  
... like a furnace.*

After calling on the "heaven we inherit" to "approach," the speaker goes on at the beginning of the third stanza to actually imagine this "heaven." If the children's screams have evoked a fundamental force underlying all of human life, what exactly is that force? The speaker approaches this ambiguously and abstractly, imagining a number of different images that could represent heaven and all its mystery.

First, the speaker imagines that heaven might include "our dead in Old Testament robes." The speaker envisions those who have already died ("our dead") wearing robes that call to mind the Bible. This [alludes](#) to visions and images within the Bible—images in which angels descend from heaven to interact with human beings. In visual depictions of these encounters, the angels are often dressed in robes.

The speaker goes on to consider this primal force not in religious terms, but in cosmic terms, describing "the heaven we inherit" as a "roiling infinity of space." This presents the universe as something massive and limitless that churns with energy. This, it seems, might be the primal force the speaker has sensed in the sound of the children's primal screams.

In these lines, the [alliterative](#) /d/ sound connects the words "dead" and "door." Even though the image of heaven as a collection of dead people in Biblical robes is much different from the image of heaven as a chaotic abyss, these two depictions are linked together by the /d/ sound, suggesting that both are plausible understandings of this primal, essential force.

Using a [parallel](#) sentence structure, the speaker imagines two other possibilities: maybe this primal force "will bend down to greet us like a father / Or swallow us like a furnace." At first, the speaker imagines that there is a God-like figure (traditionally imagined as a "father") who will "bend down" kindly to meet the speaker. But then the speaker proposes an alternative hypothesis, suggesting that this fundamental force or power might "swallow" the speaker and the other people in the apartment building in the same way that a furnace would burn up wood. This last image subtly alludes to Biblical images of hellfire while also conjuring the fiery stars and black holes of the cosmos.

The [alliterative](#) /f/ sounds in "father" and "furnace" connects

these two very different images. What links them, the poem implies, is the all-powerful force that the speaker struggles to describe. The speaker makes this struggle even clearer by framing these two images through [similes](#): the speaker imagines that this force might be *like* a father or a furnace, but not *exactly* these things. By using similes to depict these possibilities, the speaker shows that they might just be inadequate human frameworks to understand something much larger and incomprehensible.

What the speaker makes clear through this series of abstract and grandiose images is that humans will never fully know the true nature of this primal force. To make up for this, the speaker lists a series of possibilities. This evokes a range of different beliefs, whether those beliefs have to do with a biblical God or a universe that is vast and indifferent to human existence.

The speaker's attempt to describe "the heaven we inherit" hints at the fundamental human desire to *understand* this primal force, but it also acknowledges that it's impossible to do so. The use of [anaphora](#) emphasizes this desire to understand, as the speaker repeats the phrase "Whether it" alongside the word "Or":

Whether it is our dead in Old Testament robes  
Or a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space.  
Whether it will bend down to greet us like a father,  
Or swallow us like a furnace. [...]

This reinforces the multiple ways of imagining the mysterious unknown, allowing for a sense of ambiguity that reminds readers that such primal forces are often abstract and difficult to grasp.

### LINES 22-25

*I'm ready ...  
... us with grief.*

The end of line 22 reveals that the speaker is prepared to meet the primal force that runs through life and human existence—whatever that force might be.

The speaker describes this power as "what refuses to let us keep anything / For long." In other words, this force is the thing that makes everything else in life temporary (including life itself). This force, the speaker says, "teases us with blessings, / Bends us with grief," indicating that this power can create both great happiness *and* irremediable sadness. The gift of life, in other words, is wonderful but also tragic because it will eventually fade away.

While these lines shift out of the more overt [anaphora](#) of the preceding lines, they still contain a subtle form of repetition:

[...] I'm ready  
To meet **what** refuses to let us keep anything

For long. **What** teases us with blessings,

This repetition of "what"—much like the repeated phrase "whether it" in the previous lines—reinforces the sense that the speaker can't fully grasp or name this force. Instead, the speaker can only refer to it in abstract terms; it can only be understood through its impact on human life, which includes both "blessings" and "grief."

Subtle sound effects create meaning and feeling in these lines, as [assonant](#) long /e/ sounds repeat in the words "meet," "teases," and "grief." This assonance calls attention to an important idea, highlighting the notion that this force can "tease" people with temporary goodness or blessings only to deliver "grief" and loss later on. The [alliterative](#) /b/ sound in "blessings" and "Bends" also emphasizes the power of this primal force by underscoring the fact that it can grant happiness ("blessings") while also forcing people to bow ("Bends") over with pain.

Finally, note how the speaker uses [asyndeton](#) and [enjambment](#) to pull the reader forward from one line to the next. This gives the poem a quick, almost breathless quality that reflects the speaker's eagerness to understand what lies behind the children's screams.

### LINES 25-27

*Wizard, thief, the ...  
... short lives clean.*

The speaker continues by describing the primal force of the universe as a "wizard." This [metaphorically](#) compares the universe to some kind of sorcerer, suggesting that it has magical and mysterious abilities. This aligns with the idea that it's hard for people to grasp the unknowable nature of the universe, considering that wizardly magic exists beyond the limits of normal comprehension.

The speaker also presents the mysterious force of the universe as a "thief." This casts the universe as stealthy and unreliable, a depiction that fits with the previous suggestion that the universe both gives humans happiness *and* takes it away—it's almost as if the universe robs people of very the "blessings" it bestows upon them.

Using yet another metaphor, the speaker compares the universe's powerful force to a strong "wind" that "knock[s] our mirrors to the floor." Since mirrors are how people see and recognize themselves, this image suggests that this primal force can overpower the limited understandings people have about life as a whole and about themselves as individuals. This implies that the things people think they know about themselves are inconsequential or unimportant in the face of the universe's raw strength and mystery.

The speaker reinforces this idea by describing the primal force as something that can "sweep our short lives clean." Here, the

speaker metaphorically compares this power that runs through life to an enormous broom. Human lives, on the other hand, are nothing but dust that can be easily swept away or ended through death.

Both of the metaphors the speaker uses invoke familiar everyday things: the feeling of a powerful wind and the sight of a broom. In the context of the poem, though, these mundane images seem all-powerful and awe-inspiring, as the children's screaming encourages the speaker to look around and see things with new eyes. The screams, then, communicate a sense of wonder, astonishment, and perhaps even fear—all of which can be applied to the seemingly ordinary or unremarkable qualities of regular life.

### LINES 27-31

*How mean ...  
... Come for us.*

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) the smallness of daily life and the vastness of the universe's primal underlying forces. The second-to-last stanza ends with the phrase "How mean." The speaker [enjambes](#) this final line across a stanza break, delaying the conclusion of this thought until the first line of the poem's final stanza:

[...] How mean  
Our racket seems beside it. [...]

Until this point, each stanza has ended with a full stop. Here, though, the speaker uses enjambment to give the space between the two stanzas heightened emphasis, like a moment of anticipation just before the final crescendo of a song.

This encourages readers to stop and fully consider all the possible meanings of the word "mean." The word suggests that the noise of human activity is either harsh or meager in comparison to the children's primal scream, which is cosmic and profound. Either way, what's clear is that the "mean" "racket" of humanity pales in comparison to the elemental force of the children's screaming, which brings forth the raw power of the greater universe.

The word "racket" also contains several levels of meaning, since it can refer to a noisy sound but also the business of daily life. Both meanings are relevant here, since the speaker implies that the noise of individual human life is small and petty in the face of both the scream described in the poem *and* the primal force as a whole. The speaker thus implies that the conventions of daily society are, in a certain sense, a kind of "racket" or inconsequential activity.

As examples of this, the speaker uses sound-related [imagery](#) by mentioning the "stereo on shuffle" and the "neighbor chopping onions through the wall." In other words, the speaker invokes *actual* sounds of the present, restoring the reader to the scene

that began the poem, though now this scene feels different, since it is depicted "beside" that all-powerful, fundamental force the speaker has just described. The [sibilant](#) /s/ and /sh/ sounds of "stereo" and "shuffle" adds a softness or hush to the language, further underscoring the contrast between the relatively quiet and mundane sounds of everyday life and the more powerful, meaningful sound of the primal scream.

The speaker accentuates this juxtaposition even more in line 30 ("All of it [...] may never") by saying that the business of daily life is just a hiccup in the face of an all-powerful cosmos or heaven—which, the speaker adds, might never "come for us." Although the speaker has spent the majority of the poem imagining what it would be like to suddenly ascend into heaven (or some other realm), the speaker now acknowledges that this might never happen. By acknowledging this, the speaker reminds readers that mystery is simply part of existence. Upon dying, the speaker implies, it's possible that humans will find nothing but the emptiness of the wide-open cosmos, and it is this overwhelming and nearly incomprehensible possibility that makes daily human life seem so small.

### LINES 31-34

*And the kids ...  
... Upon being born.*

The poem ends by returning to the [imagery](#) of the opening scene, as the speaker once more describes the sound of the screaming children. "And the kids upstairs still at it," the speaker says, making it clear that their primal shrieking hasn't stopped.

With this return, the speaker once more uses the comic [tone](#) that defined the first two stanzas, reminding readers that the entire poem began as a playful meditation on a very simple thing: the fact that children are loud. Now, though, the speaker's thought process has expanded significantly, suggesting that the children don't just scream because they're naturally loud, but because they've tapped into some kind of profound but abstract truth about the nature of existence.

To illustrate this, the speaker offers a final comparison for this scream and the force it evokes: the children, the speaker says, are "[s]creaming like the Dawn of Man, as if something / They have no name for has begun to insist / Upon being born." This [simile](#) evokes the "primal" quality of the children's scream.

It also engages with the poem's interest in time. The speaker began by noting that the children scream at "5pm on the nose," giving a marker of time that is consistent with the conventions of modern society. Now, though, the speaker suggests that in the face of this all-powerful force, time can only be understood as eternal and cyclical. The sound of these screams, the poem implies, are similar to the sound of the very beginning of human civilization, as if the children have returned to the most basic and fundamental moment of human existence.

The speaker continues by suggesting that the thing driving the

children to scream like this is something they don't quite understand. It is so fundamental to humankind that it can't even be named. And yet, this thing "insist[s] / Upon being born" within the children, implying that the children are eager to somehow articulate that they've tapped into this primal force.

The fact that their screams sound like the "Dawn of Man" suggests that all human beings experience this feeling at some point—the difference between children and adults, though, is that adults have stopped trying to understand or address this thing that they cannot "name." The children, however, have not yet started to overlook this universal, primal force.



## SYMBOLS



### MIRRORS

Mirrors in the poem [symbolize](#) knowledge and self-awareness. They provide people with a means to examine themselves, and the idea that the primal force of the universe has the power to "knock our mirrors to the floor" therefore suggests that human knowledge is limited and inconsequential—at least compared to the mysterious nature of the broader universe. What we think we know about ourselves, the poem implies, is only a fraction of what there is to know or understand in human existence or in the universe as a whole. To illustrate this, the speaker presents mirrors—again, representations of human knowledge—as vulnerable and fragile in the face of the great unknown.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 26-27:** "Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor, / To sweep our short lives clean."



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLUSION

Reflecting on the fundamental force that runs through the universe, the speaker considers different possibilities for what, exactly, this force might be. In doing so, the speaker [alludes](#) to a range of possibilities—from biblical narratives and Christian ideas to the vast emptiness of space.

The first notable allusion appears in the second stanza ("Maybe the mother [...] inherit approach"), when the speaker imagines that if the children scream loudly enough, the entire apartment building will "lift off, and we'll ride to glory / Like Elijah." Here, the speaker refers to the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. According to the biblical story, Elijah was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire, riding "to glory" in flames. Through this allusion, the speaker suggests that the children are, in a certain sense, prophets, since through their screams they call

forth something like heaven.

As this stanza progresses, the speaker imagines the sky shifting "from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black." This dramatic [imagery](#) creates a subtle allusion to the [Book of Revelation](#), which is the last portion of the New Testament. In this part of the Bible, the world as it is currently known comes to an apocalyptic end with the [Second Coming](#) of Jesus Christ. The word "apocalypse" can be interpreted as the revealing of a prophecy or heavenly mystery. This allusion, then, helps the speaker suggest that the children's screaming evokes profound truths about existence.

The speaker continues to allude to the Bible in stanza 3 ("Whether it is [...] How mean"), imagining that this all-powerful force might take the form of "our dead in Old Testament robes." This idea references biblical narratives about angels approaching human beings, since visual depictions of these narratives often show the angels dressed in robes.

In line 21 ("Whether it [...] a father"), the speaker imagines the primal force as a "father" who might benevolently "bend down to greet us." This is an allusion to the Christian idea of God as a father. In the next line, however, the speaker imagines the greater power as nothing more than a "furnace" that might "swallow us" the way a stove would burn up wood. This alludes to biblical ideas of the fires of hell.

Lastly, the speaker says the children are screaming:

[...] as if something  
They have no name for has begun to insist  
Upon being born.

Here, the speaker alludes again to the Second Coming of Christ. According to the Bible, in the future Christ will return to earth (or be born again) and this "second coming" will signal the Judgement Day, when the Kingdom of Heaven is created on earth. This last allusion, then, conveys the powerful sense of urgency within the poem. It implies that however much people might try to ignore all that is unknown and mysterious in human life and the universe, this primal force is in fact always present, and everyone will have to reckon with it sooner or later.

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "we'll ride to glory / Like Elijah."
- **Lines 16-18:** "let the sky / Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black"
- **Line 18:** "the heaven we inherit"
- **Line 19:** "our dead in Old Testament robes,"
- **Line 21:** "it will bend down to greet us like a father,"
- **Line 22:** "swallow us like a furnace."
- **Lines 32-34:** "something / They have no name for has begun to insist / Upon being born."

## IMAGERY

“The Universe as Primal Scream” is full of vivid [imagery](#) that changes and develops over the course of the poem. The poem opens with a striking appeal to readers’ ears, as the speaker describes the high-pitched and harsh quality of the “primal scream” coming from the kids in the upstairs apartment. Not only does the speaker describe the scream itself in detail (for example, it is both “shrill” and “metallic”), but also uses an image to convey just how loud this scream is, imagining that the parents’ crystal glass is now “shattered to dust on the floor.”

The speaker also uses a vivid visual image to depict the power of the children’s voices, describing their “four pink lungs.” This emphasizes the primal quality of the screaming, since the children’s voices are described in biological terms—as the “four pink lungs” that all mammals possess.

As this scream leads the speaker to reflect on a primal, fundamental power running throughout the whole universe, the poem’s images start to feel biblical and even apocalyptic. For instance, the speaker imagines the apartment building lifting off like Elijah the prophet, who rode into heaven in a chariot of fire. The evening sky is described as changing from “blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black,” the colors invoking not only a sunset, but a possible end of the world.

The speaker then imagines this primal force as the vast, cosmic image of “the roiling infinity of space”—a description that adds a sense of awe and wonder to the depths of the children’s screaming. This force, the speaker suggests, could also be a “great / Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor.” The [metaphor](#) of the screaming as a literal wind enhances this image, making the force seem a little more tangible and immediate. It also emphasizes the [juxtaposition](#) between its power and the relative smallness of human life.

In the last stanza (“Our racket [...] being born”), the poem returns to images of the immediate present, but now these images seem different in light of what the speaker has just described. For instance, the speaker mentions the “stereo on shuffle” and a neighbor who can be heard “chopping onions through a wall.” But now these images feel somewhat transformed, since the speaker has invoked the primal, essential force underlying all of modern society. The use of imagery—and the way that imagery changes throughout the poem—therefore helps the speaker illustrate the extent to which the scream reorders how the speaker looks at the surrounding world.

### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “They open their mouths / And it rolls out: high, shrill and metallic.”
- **Lines 4-9:** “I think / Of putting on my shoes to go up and see / Whether it is merely an experiment / Their parents

have been conducting / Upon the good crystal, which must surely / Lie shattered to dust on the floor.”

- **Line 11:** “the four pink lungs”
- **Lines 13-15:** “the whole building / Will lift-off, and we’ll ride to glory / Like Elijah.”
- **Lines 16-18:** “let the sky / Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black.”
- **Line 20:** “a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space.”
- **Line 21:** “it will bend down to greet us like a father,”
- **Line 22:** “swallow us like a furnace.”
- **Line 25:** “Bends us with grief.”
- **Lines 25-27:** “the great / Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor, / To sweep our short lives clean.”
- **Line 28:** “My stereo on shuffle.”
- **Line 29:** “The neighbor chopping onions through a wall.”

## COLLOQUIALISM

The speaker mixes different forms of [diction](#) to create complex layers of [tone](#) and meaning. In the opening stanza (“5pm on [...] the floor”), the speaker uses diction that is [colloquial](#), as in the [idiomatic](#) phrase “5pm on the nose” and the remark “They both let loose at once.” These colloquialisms help create a lighthearted and comical tone.

But as the poem continues and the speaker contemplates the primal or essential force underlying human life, the diction begins to change. When the speaker commands “the heaven we inherit” to “approach,” the language feels solemn and almost prayer-like. And when the speaker imagines that everyone in the apartment building will “ride to glory / Like Elijah,” that language is biblical and particularly poetic. More complex words and phrases like “roiling infinity,” “furnace,” and even “blessings” are in keeping with this prayer-like language, conveying the hugeness of this primal force.

At the end of the poem, the speaker returns to the kind of colloquialisms that appeared in the first stanza. For instance, the speaker refers to daily life as a “racket,” a colloquial term for some kind of inconsequential activity. The speaker also says that all these aspects of daily life seem like “just a hiccough” in the face of this primal force.

Despite this lighter, more conversational diction, though, the tone now feels different, since the middle of the poem features such intense biblical language. In other words, the lightness of these daily things is now complicated by the awareness of the “primal” force beneath the speaker’s casual observations.

### Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “5pm on the nose.”
- **Line 4:** “They both let loose at once,”
- **Line 14:** “lift-off”



- **Line 28:** "Our racket"
- **Line 30:** "just a hiccough"
- **Line 31:** "still at it,"

## METAPHOR

The speaker uses several [metaphors](#) throughout the poem. In line 2, for example, the speaker suggests that the scream "rolls out" of the children's mouths, presenting the scream as a physical substance that the children are no longer able to contain. The poem therefore begins with a sense of urgency, since the scream emerges as something that is impossible for the children to hold back any longer.

In lines 25 through 27 ("Bends us [...] How mean"), the speaker [personifies](#) the primal force of the universe as some kind of "wizard" or "thief." In doing so, the speaker casts this force as something mysterious and even a bit sinister. This suggests that the unknown is often just as unsettling as wizardly magic or thievery—it is, after all, equally impossible to protect oneself from the mysterious forces of the universe as it is to fully protect oneself from shady figures like a wizard or a thief.

The speaker also metaphorically envisions the primal force of the universe as a "great / Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor, / To sweep our short lives clean." The metaphor of the wind makes these universal forces seem immediate and palpable. This metaphor also conveys the power that the universe has over human lives, since the objects of daily life—including the mirrors in which people can see and recognize themselves—are simply knocked aside by the enormous strength of the universe's primal force.

Meanwhile, the image of "sweep[ing] our short lives clean" sustains this metaphor, as though this "great wind" has the power to blow away human lives like so much dust. At the same time, the word "sweep" suggests that this universal force could be understood as a kind of enormous broom. Compared to this huge broom, human lives seem minuscule and slight. Both the wind and the broom metaphors express the power of this universal force, leading the speaker to meditate on how small daily life seems in the face of the unknowable universe.

### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "5pm on the nose. They open their mouths / And it rolls out"
- **Line 25:** "Wizard," "thief,"
- **Lines 25-27:** "the great / Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor, / To sweep our short lives clean."
- **Lines 30-31:** "All of it just a hiccough against what may never / Come for us."

## SIMILE

In addition to its use of [metaphors](#), "The Universe as Primal

Scream" also includes several [similes](#) that are important to the poem's meaning. For example, the speaker imagines in the second stanza ("Maybe the [...] inherit approach") what might happen if the children scream loudly enough, saying:

[...] Perhaps, if they hit  
The magic decibel, the whole building  
Will lift-off, and we'll ride to glory  
Like Elijah. [...]

In this section, the speaker [alludes](#) to the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. According to the biblical story, Elijah was carried into heaven (into "glory") in a chariot of fire. The speaker, then, suggests that the children are like prophets, their voices calling out to "heaven" and telling it to come closer. The speaker imagines that the whole apartment building might "ride to glory" like the biblical prophet.

This simile also has a comedic effect, since the image of the apartment building lifting into the sky is surreal and funny. At the same time, this simile occurs at a crucial point in the poem, when the speaker begins to imagine just what these universal forces are. In doing so, the speaker turns to biblical narratives to illustrate the primal power that the children's screams have called forth.

In stanza 3 ("Whether it is [...] How mean"), the speaker wonders whether this universal force might "bend down to greet us like a father" or "swallow us like a furnace." The first simile alludes to the Christian idea of God as a father. The second—"swallow us like a furnace"—calls to mind both the fires of hell *and* the starry fires or black holes of the cosmos. The fact that these are both presented as similes, however, shows that the speaker can't *truly* understand what this universal force is. Instead, the speaker imagines that it might be *like* one of these things, which are concepts the speaker can actually grasp.

At the end of the poem, the speaker says that the children upstairs are screaming "like the Dawn of Man," noting that it's almost "as if something / They have no name for has begun to insist / Upon being born." These lines suggest that the children are screaming as though it is the beginning of human civilization. They are screaming because of something even *they* can't understand, a sort of primal force that already exists and that is eternally coming into existence or "being born."

It's important, though, that the speaker uses similes to describe this screaming. This implies that it's impossible to truly understand the primal shrieking. The similes therefore make it clear that the poem is only the speaker's *attempt* to interpret this essential force, which is so fundamental and mysterious that its true meaning exists beyond the limits of human comprehension.

### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** “we'll ride to glory / Like Elijah.”
- **Line 21:** “like a father,”
- **Line 22:** “like a furnace.”
- **Line 32:** “like the Dawn of Man,”
- **Lines 32-34:** “as if something / They have no name for  
has begun to insist / Upon being born.”

## ANAPHORA

“The Universe as Primal Scream” uses [anaphora](#) to create intensity and emphasis. The first instance of anaphora occurs in line 15 (“Like Elijah...is what”), when the speaker wonders whether the children are screaming to call forth the forces of the universe:

[...] If this is it—if this is what  
Their cries are cocked toward—let the sky  
Pass from blue, to red, to molten gold,  
To black. Let the heaven we inherit approach.

The speaker repeats the phrase “if this is,” building a sense of increased momentum within the poem. The repeated phrase makes it clear that the speaker doesn’t truly know *why* the children are screaming like this—or, for that matter, *what* the primal force is that the speaker can sense within these screams. Yet the repetition also conveys the speaker’s wish (and a fundamental human desire) to *understand* this force and come into contact with it in some way.

The poem uses anaphora even more overtly in the next stanza. In lines 19 through 22, the speaker uses a [parallel](#) sentence structure, repeating the phrase “Whether it” alongside the word “Or”:

Whether it is our dead in Old Testament robes,  
Or a door opening onto a roiling infinity of space.  
Whether it will bend down to greet us like a father,  
Or swallow us like a furnace. [...]

The repetition of “Whether it” and “Or” emphasizes what the speaker *doesn't* know about the forces of the universe. Through this parallel sentence structure, the speaker imagines different possibilities that have been important in human society, from Biblical [imagery](#) of “Old Testament robes” to secular images of a “roiling infinity of space.” Anaphora in this section underlines the wide range of ways people have tried to understand the mysteries of the universe throughout the years. This allows the speaker to present religious perspectives alongside secular ideas, and this highlights the fact that there are many ways to conceptualize the unknown elements of existence—even if it's impossible to fully grasp the meaning of the universe's primal force.

## Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** “If this is,” “if this is”
- **Line 19:** “Whether it”
- **Line 20:** “Or”
- **Line 21:** “Whether it”
- **Line 22:** “Or”

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) appears throughout the poem, creating music and adding emphasis to certain words. For instance, the speaker alliterates the /c/ and /sh/ sounds in lines 7 through 9

Their parents have been conducting  
Upon the good crystal, which must surely  
Lie shattered to dust on the floor.

The hard /c/ sound of “conducting” repeats in “crystal,” the sharp sounds evoking the image of broken glass. The /sh/ sound in the words “surely” and “shattered” adds to this effect, subtly imitating the sound of fine glass sprinkling over the floor. These instances of alliteration also create a sense of music and momentum at this early stage in the poem, as the speaker uses the language to whisk readers along.

As the poem progresses, alliteration becomes even more prominent. In the first four lines of the second stanza, the /m/ sound alliterates alongside the /p/ sound:

Maybe the mother is still proud  
Of the four pink lungs she nursed  
To such might. Perhaps, if they hit  
The magic decibel, [...]

The alliterative /m/ sound carves out important words like “mother,” “might,” and “magic,” inviting readers to think about the mother's bond with her children and, more importantly, the idea that their screaming is both powerful (“might”) and mystical (“magic”). The alliterative /p/ also spotlights the words “proud” and “pink,” emphasizing the idea that the mother deserves to be proud of her children and their strong, healthy lungs.

Later, line 16 features alliteration as the speaker wonders if the children's “cries” are “cocked toward” summoning some greater power. Because it's so abrasive and harsh, the /c/ sound stands out, calling attention to this moment and, in doing so, encouraging readers to imagine that the children's screams are aimed at (or “cocked toward”) the fundamental force that runs throughout the universe.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses alliteration simply to add blips of musicality. The poem's last two lines, for example, include the alliterative /n/ and /b/ sounds, both of which add momentum to the conclusion:

They have no name for has begun to insist  
Upon being born.

The quick repetition of the /n/ sound in "no name" is rhythmic, as is the immediate repetition of the /b/ sound in "being born." This /b/ sound is loud and forceful, evoking the "insist[ence]" of this unnamed presence being brought into the world.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "let loose"
- **Line 7:** "conducting"
- **Line 8:** "crystal," "surely"
- **Line 9:** "shattered"
- **Line 10:** "Maybe," "mother," "proud"
- **Line 11:** "pink"
- **Line 12:** "might," "Perhaps"
- **Line 13:** "magic"
- **Line 14:** "Will," "we'll"
- **Line 16:** "cries," "cocked"
- **Line 19:** "dead"
- **Line 20:** "door," "opening onto"
- **Line 21:** "Whether," "will," "father"
- **Line 22:** "furnace," "ready"
- **Line 23:** "refuses"
- **Line 24:** "What," "with," "blessings"
- **Line 25:** "Bends," "Wizard"
- **Line 26:** "Wind"
- **Line 28:** "seems," "stereo"
- **Line 31:** "Come," "kids," "still"
- **Line 32:** "Screaming," "something"
- **Line 33:** "no name," "begun"
- **Line 34:** "being born"

## CONSONANCE

The poem uses [consonance](#) throughout. For example, in the second line of the poem the speaker describes how the children's screaming "rolls out: high, shrill, and metallic." The smooth, liquid /l/ sounds in these words evoke the image at hand of sound spilling out of the children's mouths.

Later in the first stanza, sharp /st/ sounds repeat in "crystal" and "dust." This consonance again works to reinforce the image, as the speaker imagines that the sound of the screaming has reached such a pitch that it has shattered the parents' crystal glassware. This /st/ sound has an almost [onomatopoeic](#) effect, calling to mind the crunch of tiny bits of glass on the floor.

The consonant /l/ sound reappears in the second stanza, winding its way through lines 13 through 15:

The magic decibel, the whole building  
Will lift-off, and we'll ride to glory  
Like Elijah. [...]

These smooth, fluid /l/ sounds create a sense of unity and connection here, highlighting the idea that the "whole building" could "lift" off the ground "like Elijah" on his fiery ascent to heaven. Similarly, the hard /c/ sounds of "cries" and "cocked"—referring to the children's screaming—are echoed in the hard /k/ of "sky," implying that the children really are calling forth this "heaven" or universal force.

Another notable instance of consonance occurs in stanza 3, when the speaker describes the forces of the universe as a "great / Wind rushing" through to "knock our mirrors to the floor" and "sweep our short lives clean." The /sh/ sound in "rushing" reflects the sound of the wind itself. It also repeats at the beginning of the word "short," and the /s/ sound in "sweep" adds to the section's overall swishing or hissing effect. The speaker's use of consonance therefore emphasizes the power of the universe by highlighting its "rushing" force, which sweeps away everything in its path.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "nose," "open"
- **Line 2:** "rolls," "shrill," "metallic"
- **Line 4:** "let loose," "once"
- **Line 5:** "shoes," "see"
- **Line 6:** "Whether," "merely," "experiment"
- **Line 7:** "parents," "conducting"
- **Line 8:** "crystal," "surely"
- **Line 9:** "shattered," "dust"
- **Line 10:** "Maybe," "mother," "proud"
- **Line 11:** "pink," "nursed"
- **Line 12:** "such," "might"
- **Line 13:** "magic," "decibel"
- **Lines 13-14:** "whole building / Will lift"
- **Line 14:** "we'll," "glory"
- **Line 15:** "Like," "Elijah," "this is"
- **Line 16:** "cries," "cocked," "sky"
- **Line 17:** "molten gold"
- **Line 18:** "black. Let," "heaven," "inherit"
- **Line 19:** "dead," "Testament"
- **Line 20:** "door," "opening onto"
- **Line 21:** "bend down," "father"
- **Line 22:** "swallow," "like," "furnace"
- **Lines 24-25:** "blessings, / Bends"
- **Line 25:** "Wizard"
- **Line 26:** "Wind," "rushing," "mirrors," "floor"
- **Line 27:** "sweep," "short," "lives"
- **Line 28:** "Our racket," "seems beside," "stereo," "shuffle"
- **Line 29:** "neighbor," "onions"
- **Lines 29-30:** "wall. / All"
- **Line 31:** "Come," "kids," "upstairs still"
- **Line 32:** "Screaming," "like," "Dawn," "Man," "something"
- **Line 33:** "no name"
- **Line 34:** "being born."

## ASSONANCE

The speaker creates emphasis and musicality through [assonance](#). Lines 14 through 16, for example, feature the long /i/ sound:

Will lift-off, and we'll ride to glory  
Like Elijah. If this is it—if this is what  
Their cries are cocked toward—let the sky

This long /i/ accentuates words like "ride" and "Elijah," making the image of the prophet's fiery ascent into the "sky" stand out even more prominently in the poem. There is also the repetition of the *short* /i/ sound in the phrase "If this is it," a small but very rapid use of assonance that simply enhances the rhythm of the language.

One of the most significant moments of assonance happens when the speaker uses the long /e/ sound in lines 23 through 28:

To meet what refuses to let us keep anything  
For long. What teases us with blessings,  
Bends us with grief. Wizard, thief, the great  
[...]  
To sweep our short lives clean. How mean  
Our racket seems beside it. [...]

As all these /e/ sounds repeat, this section of the poem forces readers to slow down and pause over the long vowels. This makes the speaker's language sound particularly musical, giving the words a cohesive sound that is distinctive and powerful. It also spotlights words like "grief" and "thief," which create an [internal rhyme](#) and, more importantly, call attention to the idea that the universe is capable of creating great sorrow by snatching happiness away from human beings.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "ride"
- **Line 15:** "Elijah," "If this is it," "if this is"
- **Line 16:** "cries," "sky"
- **Line 17:** "molten gold"
- **Line 18:** "Let," "heaven," "inherit," "approach"
- **Line 19:** "Old," "robes"
- **Line 20:** "opening"
- **Line 23:** "meet," "refuses," "keep," "anything"
- **Line 24:** "teases," "blessings"
- **Line 25:** "Bends," "grief," "thief"
- **Line 27:** "sweep," "clean," "mean"
- **Line 28:** "seems"
- **Line 33:** "They," "name"

## ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a balance of [enjambment](#) and [end-stopped lines](#) to create momentum and varied pacing. In the first stanza ("5pm on [...] the floor"), the lines become increasingly enjambed as the stanza progresses. Lines 4 through 8 are all enjambed, bringing a certain momentum to the stanza's final line, which is end-stopped.

[...] and I think  
Of putting on my shoes to go up and see  
Whether it is merely an experiment  
Their parents have been conducting  
Upon the good crystal, which must surely  
Lie shattered to dust on the floor.

The enjambment becomes increasingly noticeable as the stanza moves to its conclusion, especially when line breaks appear between "conducting / Upon" and "surely / Lie." The hurried pace that this enjambment creates gives readers the sense that the sound of the "primal scream" is intensifying, as if it has been pent-up in the children all day and is now finally able to "let loose."

This sense of intensity continues to build in the second stanza ("Maybe the [...] inherit approach"), as the speaker enjambes the majority of the lines. Once again, this builds momentum in a way that conveys just how powerful and unstoppable the primal force of the universe truly is. This intensity also makes it easier for readers to imagine that everyone in the apartment building might ascend into the sky like Elijah on his fiery path "to glory."

After slowing down through end-stopped lines at the start of stanza 3 ("Whether it is [...] How mean"), the poem again uses enjambment as that stanza intensifies, with the speaker describing how the forces of the universe affect individual human lives through both "blessings" and "grief." Line 25 features a particularly prominent instance of enjambment, as the speaker calls the universe a "wizard" and a "thief" and compares it to a strong wind:

[...] Wizard, thief, the great  
Wind rushing to knock our mirrors to the floor,

This moment of enjambment is accentuated by the speaker's use of [asyndeton](#), as the speaker omits the word "or"—or perhaps "and"—between the various names for this universal force. This creates a fast overall pace that goes well with the speaker's use of enjambment.

But the most jarring example of enjambment in the poem happens between the end of the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth:

[...] How mean

Our racket seems beside it. [...]

This use of enjambment forces readers to traverse the white space of the stanza break to see what, exactly, is "mean." The answer, of course, is that human life seems meager (or perhaps crude) in the face of the universe's primal force. This enjambment creates a crucial rupture within the poem, as the world of the poem itself feels momentarily suspended in space.

The poem's pacing depends upon this use of enjambment and the interplay it creates between the speaker's use of end-stopped lines. Although the vast majority of the lines are enjambed, it's not the case that *every* line runs into the next. This creates a push-and-pull feeling throughout the poem, allowing the speaker to control the flow of language so that the rhythm matches what's actually happening in any given moment.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "think / Of"
- **Lines 5-6:** "see / Whether"
- **Lines 6-7:** "experiment / Their"
- **Lines 7-8:** "conducting / Upon"
- **Lines 8-9:** "surely / Lie"
- **Lines 10-11:** "proud / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "nursed / To"
- **Lines 12-13:** "hit / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "building / Will"
- **Lines 14-15:** "glory / Like"
- **Lines 15-16:** "what / Their"
- **Lines 16-17:** "sky / Pass"
- **Lines 22-23:** "ready / To"
- **Lines 23-24:** "anything / For"
- **Lines 25-26:** "great / Wind"
- **Lines 27-28:** "mean / Our"
- **Lines 30-31:** "never / Come"
- **Lines 32-33:** "something / They"
- **Lines 33-34:** "insist / Upon"

## JUXTAPOSITION

The poem makes use of [juxtaposition](#) to emphasize how small ordinary life seems in the face of the universal forces the speaker describes. This juxtaposition is reflected in the language of the poem, as the speaker combines phrases that are more [colloquial](#) and conversational (such as "5pm on the nose" and "still at it") with language that invokes the Bible and prayer (such as "Let the heaven we inherit approach").

The juxtaposition between these two kinds of language shows that despite the comic, lighthearted tone at the poem's beginning, something much larger and more powerful is at work. Throughout the poem, the speaker attempts to merge everyday life with more profound thoughts about existence, hoping to imagine the primal, universal force as something that

plays out *alongside* daily life.

The poem also emphasizes the juxtaposition between the "racket"—or inconsequential activity—of modern society and the vastness of the universe through its [imagery](#). The sound of the speaker's "stereo" or the mundane sound of a neighbor chopping onions both stand in stark contrast to the epic imagery of a sky "pass[ing] from blue, to red, to molten gold, / To black." The speaker's mention of the "roiling infinity of space" also creates a severe contrast between ordinary life and the great unknown.

The juxtaposition between these images shows just how huge and incomprehensible the larger universe truly is. The speaker makes this clear by saying, "How mean / Our racket seems beside it [...]" All of it just a hiccup against what may never / Come for us." This is a direct acknowledgment of the fact that life in modern society seems unimportant and meager in comparison to more philosophical or religious thoughts about existence and the broader universe. By bringing together modern colloquial language and more poetic turns of phrase, then, the speaker manages to highlight the juxtaposition between the ordinary and the *extraordinary* while also implying that certain primal forces do, in fact, lurk in everyday life.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34



## VOCABULARY

**Primal** () - "Primal" means basic, essential, or fundamental. The word also refers to the beginning phases of human development and civilization. A "primal scream" is therefore a scream that comes from the primitive or animalistic side of human nature.

**Decibel** (Line 13) - A "decibel" is a measurement that gauges the intensity of a given sound. A whisper would have a low decibel reading, whereas a scream would have a much higher reading.

**Elijah** (Lines 14-15) - Elijah was a Biblical prophet from the Old Testament. In the Biblical story, Elijah was carried into heaven—or "to glory"—in a chariot of fire.

**Molten** (Lines 16-17) - For something to be "molten" means that it has been liquefied by intense heat.

**Old Testament robes** (Line 19) - The Old Testament is the first part of the Christian Bible. The phrase "Old Testament robes" refers to the fact that angels and other ethereal figures often appear to people in the Bible dressed in long robes.

**Roiling infinity of space** (Line 20) - If something is "roiling" this means that it is churning or in constant motion. In the poem, the speaker imagines the universe as both churning and vast.

**Racket** (Lines 27-28) - A "racket" is a loud, disruptive, or chaotic noise. In the context of the poem, the ordinary sounds of daily life seem like little more than meaningless noise alongside the children's primal screaming, which evokes something far more profound.

**Dawn of Man** (Line 32) - The "Dawn of Man" refers to the beginning of human civilization.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Universe as Primal Scream" does not follow any traditional form. However, the poem *does* create a form that is important to its meaning in several ways.

The poem's 34 lines is divided into four stanzas. The first three stanzas are each nine lines long, and the lines within these stanzas are of relatively equal length. This creates a sense of even pacing within the poem and a feeling of consistency that suggests that, despite the abstract nature of the speaker's ideas, it's still possible for the speaker to convey these grandiose thoughts about the universe and existence. In other words, the regularity of the poem's form helps organize and contain the speaker's highly conceptual ways of thinking.

However, the final stanza ("Our racket [...] being born") unsettles the poem's feeling of regularity. This is because the last stanza is only seven lines long, and the final line of the poem consists of only three words. The rest of the poem has featured lines that are more or less the same length, so now it seems like the speaker has abruptly stopped or halted in some way. This feeling of interruption occurs when the speaker describes the children's primal scream by saying that "something / They have no name for has begun to insist / Upon being born." This means that the poem ends on the cusp of this nameless thing "being born," as the speaker's words cut out right as the primal force of the universe makes it way through the children's screams.

This leaves readers in a state of unfulfilled anticipation. By suddenly deviating from the poem's rough structure, the speaker throws the ending into a state of chaos and confusion. And this confusion reminds readers that it's impossible to fully grasp or comprehend the mysteriously primal forces that run through the universe.

### METER

"The Universe as Primal Scream" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning that it has no set [meter](#). Instead, the poem is written in [colloquial](#), light-hearted language, as though the speaker is directly engaging the reader in conversation.

This absence of meter is important to the poem, since it helps establish the contemporary world that the speaker describes. Against this backdrop of everyday speech, the primal force that

the speaker evokes seems even more striking. The [juxtaposition](#) between the two reminds readers that this primal force underlies even the most daily and mundane aspects of modern life.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The Universe as Primal Scream" does not have a set [rhyme scheme](#). However, the poem does use a lot of [assonance](#), as well as some [slant](#) and [internal rhymes](#), to create music and emphasis.

For example, line 16 features a subtle internal slant rhyme between the words "cries" and "sky":

Their cries are cocked toward—let the sky

This makes the end of the second stanza sound particularly poetic and musical—an appropriate effect, since this is the point in the poem when the tone begins to shift as the speaker's thoughts become more grandiose and abstract.

Internal slant rhymes also appear in line 23: "To **meet** what refuses to let us **keep** anything." A similar use of the long /e/ sound also creates a perfect rhyme in line 25:

Bends us with **grief**. Wizard, **thief**, the great

This strong internal rhyme emphasizes the idea that the primal force of the universe often takes away happiness by bringing people loss and sadness—acting, in other words, like a "thief" of joy.

The speaker offers up another prominent internal rhyme between the words "clean" and "mean" in line 27:

To sweep our short lives **clean**. How **mean**

Once again, this rhyme spotlights the idea that the primal force is capable of thoroughly destroying human lives, which can be swept "clean" by the mysterious strength of the universe. The rhyme also highlights the word "mean," underscoring the speaker's feeling that human lives are small and meager in comparison to the more profound nature of the universe.

These slant and internal rhymes occur as the poem builds in intensity, as the speaker imagines what this primal force is and struggles to understand it. More simply, though, they create a feeling of musicality that heightens the language and draws readers through the poem.



## SPEAKER

While the speaker of "The Universe as Primal Scream" remains unnamed, it is possible to read the speaker as a representation of the poet, Tracy K. Smith. There is no indication that the poem

is meant to be read in the voice of a separate persona, and a number of details feel specifically autobiographical—like the fact that the speaker lives in an apartment building, listens to a stereo, and can hear a neighbor chopping onions. Additionally, the daily occurrence of hearing young children screaming upstairs comes across as very specific yet also ordinary enough that it could be read as an occurrence from the poet's own life.

At the same time, the speaker's anonymity allows readers to imagine themselves in this scenario, making it easier to consider what it would actually be like to hear children screaming in this way. The speaker therefore remains unknown, emerging not as a specific individual, but as an ordinary person in contemporary society who—upon hearing this primal scream—contemplates the most fundamental and unknown aspects of existence.



## SETTING

"The Universe as Primal Scream" is set in contemporary times in an apartment building. A number of details help establish this setting. For example, the speaker mentions putting on shoes to go upstairs and see why the children are screaming. This implies that the poem takes place in a modern apartment building. In such a setting it's possible to hear one's neighbors very easily, which is why the speaker not only hears the children, but also a next-door neighbor chopping onions on the other side of the wall.

The speaker's light-hearted tone at the beginning of the poem also establishes the general time period in which the poem takes place, since [colloquial](#) phrases like "5pm on the nose" and "They both let loose" feel very contemporary. This contemporary setting is important as the poem unfolds, since the speaker [juxtaposes](#) casual modern phrases with biblical and poetic ideas. This sets profound thoughts about existence against the backdrop of daily life, suggesting that larger questions about the universe lurk even in the most mundane, ordinary aspects of contemporary life.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Universe as Primal Scream" was published in Tracy K. Smith's third poetry collection, *Life on Mars*. This collection, which came out in 2011, went on to win the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and helped to establish Smith as a leading contemporary poet.

*Life on Mars* was partly written about Smith's father, who worked as an engineer on the Hubble Space Telescope (which was launched in 1990 and remains one of the largest research telescopes in orbit). Many of the poems in the book deal with

space and the cosmos while also focusing on grief, loss, and everyday life. Smith's interest in space and the cosmos surfaces in "The Universe as Primal Scream," as the speaker considers the vastness of the universe and the mysteries of existence.

"The Universe as Primal Scream," and Smith's work as a whole, features a conversational tone as well as a combination of the everyday with surreal [imagery](#), pairing mundane plot details with moments of intense lyricism and music. In this way, Smith's work echoes other contemporary poets who have sought to combine narrative and lyric styles. Smith has cited [Rita Dove](#) and [Seamus Heaney](#) as early influences, for example, both of whom often pair narrative elements with rich, lyrical imagery.

The poem can also be read as in dialogue with other poems that deal with the vastness of the universe and the unknown. In a certain sense, the poem echoes the [Romantic concept of the Sublime](#)—essentially the sense of awe or overwhelm people experience in the face of nature, infinity, or the cosmos. However, "The Universe as Primal Scream" is a distinctly contemporary poem that considers these questions in a way that is also grounded and attuned to the realities of modern daily life.

Aside from the Pulitzer Prize, Tracy K. Smith has won a range of other notable awards, including the Cave Canem Prize, the James Laughlin Award, a Whiting Award, and the National Book Award for Nonfiction. She is the author of four poetry collections and a memoir, *Ordinary Light*, and served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2017-2019.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tracy K. Smith composed "The Universe as Primal Scream" in 2011, a relatively stable period in the United States. Although the poem [alludes](#) to lofty ideas about religion and the universe, it's also a simple meditation on what it's like to hear neighboring children yell out in an apartment building each day. This attention to the ins and outs of daily life is, in some ways, perhaps a product of the times; by 2011 the United States had recovered from the economic recession of 2008, and though the country continued to deal with domestic and international difficulties, everyday life in the nation was less turbulent and tense than it was during the recession.

Of course, none of this means that Smith's personal life was smooth sailing during this period, and *Life on Mars*—the collection in which "The Universe as Primal Scream" was published—is largely about the death of her father. As previously mentioned, Smith's father worked at the Hubble Space Telescope, which is why some poems in the book contain references to the 20th-century [Space Race](#) (when the United States and the Soviet Union both tried to be the first political power to land on the moon). This particular poem doesn't allude to the Space Race, but it does contain references to outer space—references that, in the context of *Life on Mars*, might function as a way for Smith to grieve her father's death.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Tracy K. Smith Reads the Poem](https://poets.org/tracy-k-smith-reads-universe-primal-scream) – Listen to Tracy K. Smith read "The Universe as Primal Scream" in this audio and video recording from the Academy of American poets. (<https://poets.org/tracy-k-smith-reads-universe-primal-scream>)
- [Biography of Tracy K. Smith](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tracy-k-smith) – Learn more about Tracy K. Smith's life and work in this brief biographical article from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tracy-k-smith>)
- [Pulitzer Prize Citation for Life on Mars](https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/tracy-k-smith) – Life on Mars, the collection in which "The Universe as Primal Scream" was published, won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Read the citation for the award on the Pulitzer Prize website. (<https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/tracy-k-smith>)
- [Interview with Tracy K. Smith](https://iowareview.org/from-the-issue/) – In this interview with The Iowa Review, Tracy K. Smith discusses the collection Life on Mars and what poems most inspired her as a young poet. (<https://iowareview.org/from-the-issue/>)

[volume-46-issue-2---fall-2016/moving-toward-what-i-dont-know-interview-tracy-k-smith](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/about))

- [Article about the Hubble Space Telescope from NASA](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/about) – Smith's book Life on Mars was written, in part, about her father, who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. Read this article from NASA to learn more about the telescope and some of its discoveries. ([https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/hubble/about](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/about))



## HOW TO CITE

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