

# *Up The Hill*



RAPHAEL MATTO

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# *Up The Hill*

Somerville, Massachusetts

DESIGNED, ILLUSTRATED, AND PRODUCED BY RAPHAEL MATTO



TYPESET IN WHITMAN

*When Kent Lew created Whitman in 2002 he was inspired by classic 20th-century text faces like Caledonia, Electra, and Joanna. “I think of the typeface as having an essentially American quality. I hesitate to bring that up nowadays, because of our society’s current nationalistic fervor.”*

ELECTRA LT STD

*Designed in 1935 by William Addison Dwiggins, Electra is a standard book typeface. “If you don’t get your type warm it will be just a smooth, commonplace, third-rate piece of good machine technique, no use at all for setting down warm human ideas, just a box full of rivets.”*

AND JOANNA MT STD

*Joanna was designed by Eric Gill in 1930-1931, based on type originally cut by Robert Granjon (1513–1589). Gill created the typeface for his printing firm Hague & Gill—which he formed to give his idle son-in-law an occupation—and named the typeface after his daughter.*

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A NOTE TO THE READER

*All promotion for this book is by word-of-mouth—so if you like it  
please promote it on your social networks and ... email me!*

*raphaelmatto@gmail.com*

*I'd love to hear what you think, especially if you have revision suggestions for  
either this book's content or design. You can also follow me on Twitter at:*

*@RaphaelMatto*

*... for news about “Up The Hill” and future book announcements.*

*Thanks!*



*For Ethan, Aurora, and Bucket*



UP

THE

HILL



Jack and Jill went up to Byrgir  
to fetch a Sæg of water

~ *Hjúki & Bil*





## Troll stories

I KEEP MY TROLLS in a field by the road. Our dog, Buck, nips their trousers to herd them into pens on market-day, or to the barn—to be milked. I can't stand how talkative they are, but my daughter Jenna loves all the yammering and jots their stories down in a pink notebook after her chores are done. I never paid any mind myself—just a lot of nonsense to suffer through while shearing their beards, or leading them to a salt lick. So it surprises me when folks stop and ask Jenna to read from her notebook. I guess my girl knows a thing or two.

*~ January, 2016*



## The simple heart

“Study each organ, each system in your body,” the Master began. “A muscle or bone that seems simple could be connected to vital processes.” As he spoke, he pinched a vein in his thumb and began teasing it out along the side of his fingernail—carefully at first, and then faster as it became more substantial, then flourishing it like a magician dragging out endless lengths of scarves. The class watched his circulatory system pile up and coil around his bare feet.

“I know where each vein and artery in my body belongs, and I understand why it’s there. I must visualize the network before I can remove even a small part of it; otherwise, my mind won’t take on the burden. Any questions?” He squinted at his students.

No questions.

“Knowing your own body will also give you power over other bodies, as I will demonstrate. Who will volunteer?”

The students peeked sheepishly at each other. Finally, a sneering girl with wooden shoes scraped her chair back and walked to the front of the class. She stood squarely in front of the Master and stared at him.

“Thank you, Alexis,” the Master said, and snatched her heart from her chest. “Now think,” he said to her, dropping the heart in a plastic bag. “What did your heart do?”

Alexis’ face twitched grotesquely. After a moment, she tried to speak but heaved air instead, reaching out to steady herself on a table. Blood bubbled and ran from the corners of her mouth onto her dress. The Master held up the plastic bag to the rest of the class. “Help Alexis,” he said. “She’s dying. What does the heart do? You’ll find the answer in yesterday’s reading assignment, on page 32.” Several students were already flipping through the pages of a heavy volume. A small bald girl raised her hand unnoticed, then spoke up.

“The heart is rather simple, sir. There are two pumps. One pushes blood into the lungs for fresh air, the other pushes blood back into a bunch of

arteries, like the ones you dropped on the floor earlier.”

The Master snorted. “It’s true,” he said. “The heart is a simple muscle you can do without. Two pumps, Alexis, that’s all. Visualize it. Your mind can do its work. Liberate yourself.”

Alexis gaped at him, then at the little bald girl; their eyes locked. Alexis clenched her fists. The veins on her temples bulged and her body shook—it shook more and more violently until one of the students stood up to protest, but Alexis held up her hand, collected herself, and ventured a slow, controlled breath. Color returned to her face. She looked from the little girl back to the Master, blinking away tears—then spat blood onto the floor in front of him.

“Good,” he said and uncapped a marker. He took the plastic bag holding Alexis’ heart, wrote her first and last name on it, and put it in a freezer at the front of the room. “You can have it back on Monday. The rest of you, practice over the weekend. I want every one of your hearts in that freezer by the end of next week. If you want to live forever, your body must be simplified—a focused vessel for your will. You will learn to hang your skin in the closet every night as I do, above your shoes.”

Alexis staggered off the stage and dropped into the seat next to the bald girl—who reached out and touched Alexis’s wrist, feeling her pulse. “Slow it down a little,” she whispered. “You’re in control now.”

~ May, 2016







## *Fall*

**I**t's fall inside and  
the knobs make a racket  
dropping off the doors.  
Children slip from our  
arms in photos and drift  
to litter the staircase.  
Birthday cards and magnets  
unstick from the fridge  
and the faucet clatters  
into the sink. Kitchen drawers  
hang menacingly. Soft thuds  
in the closets; we sweep  
clothes into piles on the rug  
that our daughter hides in.  
I blow the bristles off my  
toothbrush. Forks and spoons  
litter the dining room—  
we kick through this  
underbrush in our boots.  
The couches, so stark without  
cushions, the sky—through holes  
in the shingles—is bright  
with winter, and we watch  
as the chandelier explodes  
onto the floor in the foyer.

*~ December, 2019*







## Cellular Autonomous Irrational Neural nEtwork

I N 1946, COMPUTERS made the first man. He was primitive, filled an entire barn, and weighed nearly thirty tons. During meal times, CAINE (named after the biblical figure ENIAC<sup>1</sup>) could eat more than twenty chickens, eighty ears of corn, and twelve pints of ice cream in one sitting, which led to the rumor that CAINE consumed more food than the three neighboring livestock farms combined.

Complex irrational conclusions were generated with CAINE by presenting a sequence of illustrated punch-cards to his visual inputs. He churned out judgements based on incomplete and contradictory evidence in an average of 2,860,000 microseconds—or a rate of 21 per minute. This ability to actively produce verifiably false conclusions led to compound errors, each accumulating on the bad data of the previous—but also brilliant supposition; indeed, CAINE achieved results no computer could hope to match. Finally, we could theorize about the nature of the universe without a complete data set. And after CAINE had “learned” from several of his own self-generated conclusions, he began to *introspect*—we could simply pose a question without any additional parameters and still, incredibly, expect an answer—and those answers were many times the most fully formed and actionable. It was all we had hoped for, and more.

But no one predicted how completely we would come to depend on men only a short time later, in business, government, and even in personal aspects of our daily routines—or how our most paranoid fears about them might begin to play out before our very eyes.

~ January, 2016

<sup>1</sup> ENIAC or “Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer” was announced in 1946 as the first reprogrammable digital computer.



## *Feral*

Go feral in death.  
Sit back on all fours  
and sniff.

Sniff the countertop—there.  
Something.  
You want to hunt

the people you knew.  
Your love for them  
is easy to understand  
now, not like when you were alive.

Burrow into a stain,  
darken it, infest your old  
bed, tucked into shadows,  
or a drop of water sliding  
down the window.

The footstep of a ghost  
leaves a mark on time  
that won't wash out—  
it gives you away.

*~ October, 2018*





Bless you!

**I**MAGINE: you are a soldier invading a host planet. All around you, brothers in arms are digested by hideous white blood cells. You lay down your weapon and prepare for the worst. Suddenly, miraculously, the planet itself expels you from the battlefield—swaddled in a cloud of gas—at speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour—up up out!—out of its nose. You’re safe.

No. You are alone, drifting in the nothingness of outer space. You need living tissue, a new host, or you will die. You start to die. But then, a second miracle: a voice rumbles the atoms of the universe. And the voice carries a Word. And that Word is “Bless.” You paddle helplessly toward the Word, aware that a gateway is opening—a wormhole? A portal? And as you drift safely through its closing lips and are once again surrounded by the warm glow of tissue—the rumblings of a second Word wash over your body. The second Word is “you.” And you—in awe—you pray to Him then, for all He provides, and for His blessing.

~ February, 2016





## How to make a ghost

**A**PRIL LAY IN THE HOSPITAL BED. It hurt to open her eyes. She felt her mother's hand in hers, heard machines beeping, nurses paging doctors on the intercom, and her father snoring, probably in a chair over by the window.

It wasn't fair. They said she was going to get better. They said she wouldn't even miss softball tryouts. But here she was, back at the hospital. The doctor asked her something, but she didn't have the energy to talk to him, and that priest—the ugly one she barely knew—she could still sort-of hear his voice, too. It was like when her father put her to bed, slowly turning down the volume on the radio before finally clicking it off. There was a long, loud beep like a dial tone, and something bad happened.

When she opened her eyes, her mother was smiling at her.

"It's okay, April. It's over now."

April looked around the room. Two nurses were packing up and unplugging the machines. Her father was standing with his forehead pressed against the window.

"What happened?"

"Well. I'm sorry, but you didn't make it. You died about ten minutes ago."

"What? No. Dad, are you ... crying?"

"April." Her father walked over and wrapped her in a sloppy hug. "I loved you so much." He looked at her face, then burst out sobbing. "I have to get out of here," he said, then wiped his nose and left.

"Your father is taking it pretty hard," April's mother said. "I'm afraid I have to be the practical one this time. Here are your clothes—sorry it's just your softball uniform and a sweatshirt, that's all that was in the car. Take your time getting dressed, but we do need to leave. They want us out of the room before two."

April glanced at the clock on the wall. "That's it? Can't they try the electric

chest shock thing?”

“They did all they could. We can talk about it on the ride home.”

The receptionist smiled at April and handed her a lollipop while April’s mother filled out the insurance paperwork. “My uncle died last year,” the receptionist said.

“I bet he was old,” April said.

“He was, yes. But he was still surprised. And angry. *Confused.*”

“Why was he confused?”

“He didn’t understand why he had to leave. And we didn’t want him to go, at least at first. But it was his time.” She winked at April. “Don’t worry, sweetie, it gets easier. You’ll figure it out.”

“Asshole,” April said as they got onto the elevator. Her doctor got on at the next floor, nodded to her awkwardly, then looked away and fidgeted with his stethoscope.

April got into the back seat and buckled up; she wasn’t about to make that mistake again. Getting tossed through the windshield had hurt a lot. “I feel kind of bad for him.”

“Who, sweetie?”

“My doctor, on the elevator. He looked really sad.”

April’s mother pulled out onto Route 1. “Of course he’s sad. Everyone is sad. Now—there are some things we need to discuss. Grandma is flying in tomorrow to help with the funeral and you know how picky she is, so we should find you a coffin before she gets here. Otherwise it will be a nightmare. That means right now.”

“I’m really tired, Mom. Can’t we just go home?”

“The funeral is in three days, and there’s a lot that needs to happen.”

April stared out the window, scowling. “What if I don’t want a coffin?”

“I doubt it’s pleasant to be buried without a coffin.”

A moment later they pulled into the funeral home’s parking lot. April looked at the dirty building. “What if I don’t want to be buried? Why do I have to be buried?”

Her mother shrugged. “That’s what we do, April. Some people are cremated, and some people are pushed out to sea on a little burning boat. You’re getting buried in a coffin. I need you to be an adult about this. Please. And no sulking.”

“I don’t even feel dead.”

“Well, you are.”

“What’s the difference, Mom? How can you even tell?”



"There is no difference," she said, pinching April's cheek.

"Ow!" April rubbed her cheek. "Well then how do I know I'm dead? What if you're all just lying to me?"

"Don't be absurd. Would the doctor lie? Would I lie?" She looked at April pointedly. "It happened." She fished something out of her purse and handed it to April.

April skimmed the paper. "What is this? 'Form 302, Pronouncement of Death .... Time of death: 3:41 pm.'"

"It's from the hospital. Satisfied?"

April gritted her teeth, "No."

The funeral home was cold, even colder in the basement where the coffins were on display. April let her mother talk to the salesman while she browsed. The price tags were on the inside of the lids; she had to open each coffin to see how much it cost. The satin and velvet interiors sent little shivers up her spine as she ran her fingers over them. Most were between two and four thousand dollars. *What a rip-off*, April thought. She tugged on her mom's arm, interrupting the salesman.

"Just get the cheapest one, and let's get out of here."

The salesman looked down at her. "Hello there. Now, is that really how you want to be remembered? The girl in the cheap coffin?"

"Of course she doesn't. April, what about that pink one? With the light blue satin. Isn't that the same color as your Junior Prom dress?"

"It's really ugly."

"We'll take that one."

It was quiet in the car.

"How come you're not sad, Mom?"

"Don't pick a fight with me, April. People cope in different ways. And there are stages. I'm sure I'll be very sad after the funeral."

"You mean after I'm buried."

"Yes, April," her mother sighed. "After that."

"And you won't have to deal with me anymore."

"You know that's not fair."

The priest was waiting for them in the driveway. April's mother invited him in and sat him down at the table with a glass of water. He spoke mostly to April's mother, but frowned at April from time to time.

"These sorts of transitions can be awkward," he began. "So it's in everyone's best interest to establish some ground rules."

"Anything that makes this easier on April."

“Okay, then. First—I recommend clearing out the deceased’s bedroom and personal effects. It’s good to get that done right away. Otherwise you may never do it and the room can become a shrine to your grief.”

“A shrine to her grief?” April snorted.

April’s mother ignored her. “I’ll clean after you leave, Father. We’ll need the extra space anyway—for the reception.”

“But Mom! Where am I going to sleep?”

“You can sleep on the couch, sweetie. It’s just for a few days.”

“And then in the dirt. Really appealing.”

“No, April—that’s why we got the coffin.”

“It’s pink!”

“If you cared so much about where you’d be sleeping an hour ago, you might not have ended up with a pink coffin.”

“No!”

“How about this: if you sleep on the couch tonight, you can watch as much TV as you want.”

The priest nodded. “Yes, that’s good. TV is good, keep her inside. It’s best if she doesn’t interact with the living. News of her death will have spread. It’s a small town, after all, and it may be embarrassing for you if she’s seen somewhere, like—I don’t know, the ice cream parlor.”

April rolled her eyes and stood up. “This is really, really unfair. I’m not even supposed to be dead! Tell him, Mom. I was supposed to get better!”

“There were complications, April.”

“Who cares about the complications—that’s what you said! That’s what everybody said!” April stormed off to her room. They could hear her throw herself on her bed and start crying.

“This is always the most difficult part,” the priest said. “Especially if the doctors got her hopes up. Don’t worry, just try to keep her in the house—and make sure she’s in that coffin on Wednesday. We had a couple no-shows last month and it’s very disrespectful. It’s a waste of everyone’s time and money.

“She’ll be there, Father.”

“Thank you, Jeanne. And, well, I don’t always mention it, but there are ... *other* complications—if she isn’t properly buried—that maybe you should be made aware of, given her present emotional state. She needs to know that she doesn’t belong here anymore. Can you get her to understand that?”

“I can do that.”

“I hope so. Otherwise you’ll have a ghost on your hands. She could haunt you. And then it becomes my problem.”

April's mother set her mouth. "No need to worry."

An hour or so later, April slipped out the patio door, pulled her hood up, and walked down the block toward the high school. She needed some fresh air, and to stretch her legs after all that time in the hospital bed. There were still a good two hours of daylight, and, as she passed the school, she heard the crack of a baseball bat and the familiar shouts of her friend, Bobby. She wandered around the fence to the dugout.

"Hey! April—where you been?" Bobby yelled, eyeing her uniform. "We need someone else on Mike's team to make it even."

Mike was on deck. "Hey man, no," he said. "You already dumped me with that." Mike gestured with his head to two giggling girls in the dugout.

"Whatever. April, you're with us. Take right field."

Someone tossed her a mitt. She jogged into the unmown outfield. Fireflies were lighting up the dark bushes near the water fountain and great pink stripes of clouds spanned the sky above them. April watched the batters and sniffed the oil and sweat on her glove. She caught two fly balls that sailed up and sat bright against the sky—and watched another disappear over the fence.

"Good hit, Bobby!" She yelled, as Bobby jogged around first base. He waved to her. *Summer is almost over*, she thought, smiling to herself.

The streetlights came on as she walked along the sidewalk back to her neighborhood.



Her mother was furious when she walked into the kitchen.

"I've been worried sick. What about the ground rules!"

"I never agreed to any ground rules."

"It's for your own good, April. Don't you understand that? There needs to be some kind of closure. And not just for us—your father, me—closure for you. It's time to move on."

"You can call it off, Mom. I'm not getting in that box. I was just playing with Mike and Bobby and those guys. It was really nice out there."

"You weren't supposed to leave the house, April."

"They didn't care."

"Did you tell them you were dead?"

"No."

"Well they're going to find out, April. You can't do things like that anymore."

It's just not right."

"I don't care."

Her mother puffed out her cheeks. "Then—well, you can't stay here."

"Why?"

"Because ... because I care! It's *embarrassing*. And, in case it hasn't dawned on you, this is your fault. If you'd worn your seat belt, like I told you a million times—"

"Fine!" April yelled, heading to her room. She didn't know what she was doing—rummaging in the mess of stuff her mother had pulled out—packing, maybe. Her room was half empty—posters torn down, the sheets stripped off her bed. It looked like her mother had a tantrum herself. April opened her door and yelled down the hallway. "Mom! Why did you mess up my room?" When her mother didn't answer, she started crying a little, talking to herself. "Okay. Just please put my room back the way it was." She sat down on the bed and let herself cry.

Her mother appeared at the door a moment later. She was on the phone. "Yes. Yes, she's back now, she's right here. April, it's Father Paisley. There's something important you should know about. Ghosts."

"I'm not talking to the stupid priest," she said between sobs. "Who cares about ghosts! I can't believe you went through my stuff!"

"April. Listen, you have to let all of this go. Look—see? It's just some posters, jewelry, shoes ... toy animals, just stuff—*things*."

"How can you say that?" April said, and picked up her mitt. "This is Grandpa's catcher's mitt—Dad gave it to me." Her mother stared at her, wincing. "You know what, Mom, you let it go—you *let it go*!" April got up and stumbled down the hall to her father's study, where he had passed out behind a bottle of scotch. She hugged him and his scratchy sweater until he stirred.

"April? Your mother's looking for you. Hey, what's wrong?"

"Dad, I want to sleep in my room tonight."

"That's going to be the flower room, sweetie. A room full of flowers all for you. Your mother made up the couch."

"She hates me."

"No, she doesn't."

"Yes, she does."

"Well, sometimes I think she hates me too. Hey, you want to watch Star Wars? We could do a marathon. Bet you'll fall asleep before Empire."

"Okay," April said, sniffing.

"Great. I'll make some popcorn."



The next morning, April tip-toed around her sleeping father. She took her catcher's mitt and bat from the foyer and stood in the backyard in her bare feet. It was cold but it felt good. If there really was no place for her anymore—fine. But she wasn't going to lie around in some stupid pink box just to make her mother happy. She could figure out this one on her own. She could make it work ... and what was that priest worried about? Ghosts? What did that even mean? Well, screw him. She'd sit in the shed and wait for the whole funeral thing to blow over, or maybe she'd go down into the basement to play with her old Commodore 64, or climb up into the attic—yeah the attic! And she could stand in the back yard at night and stare in at her parents while they ate dinner. Maybe then April's mom would understand how unfair it was and let her back in.

~ May, 2016





## *Little Pipe*

Found in an attic—  
children blow the dust off  
and there you are,  
your wings, ready

to be glued, posed  
and placed on a sheet  
of blue paper. You never

laid eggs, you died young.  
But now you are happy,  
a scarecrow tipping her hat

to horrify parts of  
these children—they don't  
even know it! You fly right in

teaching them. Little Pipe,  
whose bones an orchestra of  
somber musicians caress,

bend to the dark wind  
once more.

*~ July, 2017*







## Us, everywhere

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that, once, a man could gaze into the depths of space and feel alone. Now ships sent to the farthest stars all return with the same story. Human beings, everywhere. Planets and moons crowded and jammed with living quarters, trash, and other evidence of men's activities. Even small asteroids and comets are covered with our cities. How did we spread so far?

I've always known that—if I could find an empty solar system *somewhere*, a single planet, or gaseous inhospitable moon—I would be happy. I'd finally have "solitude"—as they say in the ancient books—room to think and think clearly. My home planet is not as advanced as others. Men escaped from our galaxy only two or three millennia ago. Interdimensional travel was a novelty in my grandfather's time, and even then—in every space they mapped—there were always people. Always something like a television, a pencil sharpener, a rocking chair, a violin.

Some religions prophesy men will encounter intelligent life forms—like us, but not like us. Monstrous, mysterious, interested in experimenting on our bodies and minds, simply because we are different. I can relate to that. I would search every last rock out there, just to find something new—if I believed it existed. But I don't. It's just us, everywhere.

~ February, 2016



## Bike ride

It takes a long time  
to ride through the sun  
on my bike

but the flowers  
are spectacular, the whole  
world on fire—and we explode

together, all day—  
a boil of white hellsurf,  
the road heaving with chunks  
of star and universe  
as I stand on my pedals, so

determined, so centered  
here—and not just because  
Mars and Jupiter are leashed  
to my Olympic hammer.

It cools me to think of you  
on Earth, reading your horoscope  
through a telescope  
or microscope.

If you were here, I would say  
*Pretend you're a monk protesting  
injustice, pretend it's 1945 Hiroshima—or  
Arizona in July, make the best of it.*

You'd hold your burning hand  
to my burning face—I'd kiss the fire  
in your hair and we'd flare up,  
blinding the Eastern Seaboard  
eight minutes from now.

That's a little fantasy I have,  
while I grind out the miles.

Oil on the chain burns off—my hat  
lights up like a marshmallow, and  
there is a bear, or something  
like a bear, and more than one  
of them, their firey fur obscures  
their faces as I ride among them,  
all of us delirious here, in the center

of the sun. *I should leave now*, I think  
over and over, pedaling harder until  
I finally pedal out, through burnt bushes,  
into Space and it's quiet

again, the front of my body freezing  
as I ride back to you in the suburbs.

~ August, 2019







## Eno

**M**y friend hides her twin brother, Frank, in her dog, Eno. There's a zipper to let Frank out so he can walk around the block at night to get some exercise. Eno is an empty bag of a dog during these times; he drags himself to his water bowl, barking breathlessly to signal his confusion while we wait for Frank to return—who, grinning from ear to ear, zips himself back into Eno, kicking at the skin from the inside to get settled.

*~ October 2019*







## Teleport my baby

“... and I’d like to announce that the first approved use of our teleportation technology is assisted delivery!” The man swung his white coat aside. A small stage behind him rotated and curtains parted to reveal a woman on a bed moaning with labor pains. “Mary will pioneer this miraculous medical technique.”

There was a ZAP! as lightening leapt from a metal coil and struck Mary’s belly. She lay stunned for a moment, then sat up, poking at her belly as it deflated.

“There you have it, folks. Mary avoids the more severe pains of childbirth, no stretching, no scars, no mess to clean up, while Shirley ...” He paused while a scantily clad nurse with pink lipstick sauntered around the stage cradling a sour faced baby. “... yes, while Shirley here retrieves the little tyke from our reconstitution bath, little worse for wear.”

The applause sign flashed, and the crowd clapped. Mary dropped her feet off the side of the bed, holding her head, then stumbled forward.

“Because anesthetics are unnecessary, the mother can drive her newborn home immediately.” The man’s smile faded as Mary caught his sleeve.

“Where’s my baby,” she grumbled.

Shirley danced lightly over. Mary grabbed the baby, who hissed at her; they stared angrily at each other under a cloud of matching statically charged hair. Mary turned to the man in the white coat.

“What about the umbilical cord? Where did that go?”

“Everything the patient needs to know is in this brochure.” The man in the white coat said, turning to the audience. “Mothers acquaint themselves with the ins and outs of the procedure, sign at the bottom, and show up any time after eight months. We’re located next to the hospital. Isn’t it amazing?”

Applause again. Mary squinted out into the crowd.

“And this is only one of the many ways our teleportation technology will be

used in the future. Investors have confidence our procedures are well placed to become standard across sectors. We can reconstitute any object, so long as it is composed of chemical compounds our computers are familiar with. By incinerating a target and scanning its particles as they are destroyed we extract almost 90% of its structural data. Algorithms make educated guesses to fill in the holes, the data is stored for any amount of time, transferred to our baths, and *voila!*”

Mary had been listening, squinting her eyes. She took a step towards the man. “Did you just *incinerate* my baby?”

“Yes, but he was only gone for a moment. We’ve reconstructed him almost exactly as he was. But you’ll never know the difference, because you never met him!”

Mary was not soothed.

The doctor rolled his eyes. “Just pretend we put him to sleep and woke him up somewhere else.”

“I’m going to sue you.”

“That’s all the time we have for today. I’m sure you’ve all got lots of great questions. They can be answered by our trained experts waiting for your call.”

~ January, 2010

## Origins

“Jesus Christ!” God bellowed as his son pushed *another* plate of broccoli off his highchair.

~ *January, 2016*



## Big Bang Day

WE'D BEEN DRIVING BACK in time all day, 60 hours per hour, under the speed limit—Mom's a stickler about that—*finally* approaching the Big Bang. After we got stamped at the gate, the park ranger rattled off a lecture about respecting the natural beauty of our collective heritage, *blah blah blah*. My little brother Teddy got some Bang Franks (Bang for your Buck!) and firewood at the Visitor's Center, and we set up our tent on plot 16, which was on a twenty-minute orbit around the bathrooms. Some guys my age—sixteen, maybe eighteen—somersaulted in zero-G towards the shower house with just towels on. Teddy saw me watching and yelled, "Her name is Jill!" So I had to pinch him.

It was Big Bang Day and fracking crowded, especially over where the real fireworks were happening—that moment right after the Bang. We had to use handrails to pull ourselves down a boardwalk to the observation platforms and towards that constant deafening roar. Plus, it was way too bright.

Everyone looked like us: families waiting for their vacations to end. It was depressing; there was Teddy shoving to the front of the line in his Red Sox cap, nerdy tortoise-shell glasses, and white tube socks—Mom along for the ride, rummaging in her fanny pack for chapstick, and Dad, interchangeable with any of the other hairy mid forty-year-old men pressed in around us, none of whom knew how to wear shorts—and, of course, me, trying to melt into nonexistence under a hoodie.

I don't like people much, but Dad *really* doesn't like people, so he kept going off on his own. I could tell Mom was getting panicky—and just like that, our vacation was turning to crap, like they always do.

I needed to get back home. My best friend Sandy and I—we'd been making fake IDs and, well, a ton of cash, frankly. We were *good* at it; she was the brains and I was the talent; we had templates for most decades in the 20th century and offered a money-back guarantee all the way up to the mid 1990s—that's

when they started gluing on encoded magnetic strips and holograms. It was an art getting those right. But Sandy'd got arrested the day before and I was freaking out.

"This sucks," Teddy said on the walk back to our station waggon.

"Pack up," Dad said. "I'm finding us a quieter spot. No arguing."

We all jumped in and those two guys from plot 12 watched us leave. One of them smiled at me. *Customers*, I thought, then shook my head. Well, a missed opportunity of some kind, anyway. Dad drove further back in time down one of the bumpy ranger roads while the sound of "nucleosynthesis" (yes, I am also the teacher's pet) faded behind us, along with its glow. Black sand glittered on the road in our headlights—there was nothing else to see. Finally, we rolled to a stop next to a sign under a street lamp that said "Beginning of the Universe." Two other families were there; one was posing, fiddling with a selfie stick. There was also a plaque that pointed out a spec about a hundred yards away. It looked like a firefly frozen in place—the first thing to exist. I made Teddy read the sign out loud to practice:

"Uh, okay. 13.8 billion years ago, there was a ... uh, an in-finitely dense, tiny ball of matter. Then it went *bang!*—giving rise to the atoms, mol ... molecules, stars, and galaxies that we see today. Everything came from this spec, even *you*."

"Pretty exciting, huh?," I said. "It all started right there."

Teddy squinted into the darkness, scowling.



We hadn't found another place to camp. Dad was sitting in his seat holding the steering wheel, being quiet in that way Mom hates.

"It's okay, Jason," Mom said, patting his hand. "Really. They sell earplugs and sleep masks at the Visitor's Center. Let's go back."

"No, let's go a little bit further."

Teddy and I looked at each other—*Dad's gonna ruin everything again*. What could we do—talk to him? Sometimes it's easier to just let Mom handle it. I had no signal on my phone this far from the Visitor's Center—so no updates on Sandy. Was she still in jail? Had she told the police about me? What about our money? I had plans for that. But I had to relax or Mom would suspect something was wrong. So we all sat quietly as Dad drove even further back in time.

Our headlights passed over another sign with a bunch of bullet holes in it



that just said, “Dead End.” Teddy and I watched the other families get smaller through the back window. Some of them were pointing at us. Then Dad downshifted and we all held our breath as he eased the car off the end of the road and into ... what? Space? Time? Neither of those existed this far out—wasn’t that what we’d just read on those signs? We drifted, rotating around the car’s axis, until Dad leveled us out, then gave it some gas.

“That was it back there, Jason. All there was and ever will be, like the sign said. You know that, right?” Mom said.

“I know.”

“Well. What are you doing? Where are we going?”

“Just getting a little distance on it. Won’t go too far. Promise.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Come on, this is fun!”

“And how are we going to find our way back without a road?”

“It won’t come to that.”

“Uh ... hey Dad? There’s a ranger.”

A kid in uniform pulled up beside the car on a dirt bike, a little older than me. Cute in a dorky way. Not a customer. He held onto Dad’s window frame to stabilize himself and grabbed at his hat, which was floating away.

“Hi, folks! The Big Bang is back there. Looks like you took a wrong turn?” The kid was doing his best to smile. It was probably his first job.

“No wrong turn, I just want to see what’s out here.”

“There’s nothing out here, sir.”

“Oh, I know that. I mean, I want to see what it’s *like* out here.”

“What it’s like?”

“Yes. It was a little crowded at the campsite.”

The ranger took off his hat, scratched his head, and eyed the park stamp on our windshield. “If there’s a problem, I can find you folks a better spot.”

“Really? How likely is that?”

The ranger seemed to remember that it was Big Bang Day. “Well, I’m going to have to ask you to head back anyway.”

“We’re not in the park anymore. The Park Service doesn’t own any of this, does it?”

“Uh ... no, sir. Technically, no. I mean, there’s nothing out here, so nobody *can* own it. Since there’s nothing *to* own. Well, maybe it’s possible to own nothing, but no we—”

“Then I’m free to keep going.”

“Like I said, technically there are no *rules*—”



"Great!" Dad said, rolling up his window. He started driving forward again. I turned around and waved at the ranger, who blushed and waved back. Teddy snorted.

"Thank you for being polite to him," Mom said.

"He's just doing his job."

Mom sighed, then reached across to Dad's side to hold his hand. "Okay, maybe you're right. This could be fun. This is what vacations are all about. Spontaneity. New frontiers!"

Teddy rolled his eyes, *but good for her—good for Mom*, I thought.



The ranger followed us for a while, then flashed his headlight and turned around. It felt weird leaving the park behind, the weight of the black void in front of us, endless without size. Teddy kept looking back with his binoculars, then said, "Dad, the street light's gone."

"Good man. Mark the spot where you last saw it."

"How?"

"Try putting something on the window."

Teddy got out the first-aid kit and taped an x on the window. The lamp immediately drifted to the left of the x.

"How's that supposed to work?" I asked.

Dad stopped the car and looked back at us, frowning. "We need to leave something."

"Like a bread crumb!" Teddy grinned.

"You got it, Bud. Something we can see from a distance."

"Jill's suitcase is huge—ow!" I'd kicked Teddy.

"That's perfect."

"Jason!"

"She can empty it out first."

I was too dumbfounded to object, so I wrestled it out of the trunk, then remembered—the fake IDs! I always carried a few samples with me, besides the one in my purse. Teddy tore at the zipper and dumped the contents all over the back seat. Just clothes, thank God. I'd forgotten the IDs at home, probably in the drawer next to my bed. But that introduced a new problem: they would be easy for the police to find.

Teddy rolled down his window, then lifted the suitcase. "Throw it out?" He asked.

"No, hold it out and let go gently. We don't want our bread crumbs drifting off."

"Done!"

We watched the suitcase behind the car; a pair of my underwear floated from its mouth.

"Oops," Teddy said.

"I kind-of needed those."

Dad started driving again. "Get out those binoculars, Bud."

Teddy snapped to attention and reported our progress in 30-second intervals until—"Gone! Her suitcase is gone."

"Great, toss out the next one."

"On it!" Teddy had already emptied his suitcase.

We repeated the drill. Dad and Teddy—they were having fun. I caught Mom wink at me in the rear-view mirror. She didn't even flinch when Teddy let her golf bag fly, but I knew she had a breaking point.

"What do we do now?" Teddy asked. "No more bags."

"We could toss you," I suggested.

Dad thought for a minute, then craned his neck around to scan the back seat. Teddy and I were buried under clothes.

"You guys thinking what I'm thinking?" Dad said.

"No," I said.

"Definitely not," Mom said.

"Way ahead of you." Teddy pulled his arms free and tossed one of Mom's dresses out the window.

"This is a disaster," Mom said, calmly. She was rallying, recalculating, waking from a trance—*not good*. Dad saw it too and backpedaled.

"Just socks, Bud. Small stuff. And your mom gets the final word."

Mom's eyes flashed.

"For the kids," Dad whispered.

"Are you kidding! Jason. For the kids, my ass!"

"We're almost there, Jeanne."

"Where? We're almost where? Are you nuts?"

"We can't go back now." He stared at her for a long moment, shrinking, then threw up his hands. "We're off the map! New frontiers, spontaneity, right?" His eyes struggled to twinkle. Was he making things better or worse?

It'd been a hard year for Dad. He'd gained a bunch of weight, and his hair was going grey. Some kid was his manager at work now, and Dad wasn't fighting back. It was kind-of pathetic. I sure as hell wasn't going to end up like

that. Sandy and me—*oh right, Sandy*. Okay, so maybe I wasn't going to end up any better.

But how did Sandy get caught? Maybe one of our customers tried to use their ID at a border crossing. A shiver ran up my spine. Was Sandy was being questioned right now? I bet she'd keep her mouth shut—that'd be such a kick-ass fuck-you to the cops, if she pulled it off. Plus, I'd owe her forever and she'd know that. I *really* didn't want to get caught, now that I thought about it—I might get kicked out of school. And what about college? *And what about Mom?*

The tires touched down on patches of black sand every so often, but there was nothing else out there—just our trail of floating luggage. Teddy'd also tossed a couple bandanas, breakfast coupons from the Visitor's Center, empty bags of chips—they drifted off; I decided it wasn't the best time to point out that our bread crumb trail was disintegrating. Maybe it was better if we never found our way back.

Mom was still frowning at Dad. "Okay, Jason. I give up. I love you, but this might be the last trip."

Dad absorbed whatever that meant without comment, gripped the steering wheel and urged the car forward again.

We continued in a harmony of silence. Teddy pushed something out the window every so often. I may have dozed off.

"That's the last of it," Teddy announced. He seemed disappointed.

"Okay. Good a spot as any." Dad pulled over on some sand, got out, yawned, stretched, opened the trunk, grabbed a beer from the cooler and handed it to Mom. Then he started setting up the tents.

Teddy got out his matches and the firewood.

It was good to be out of the stale air of the car. I stretched, looked around, and checked my phone. No bars of course—and pitch black in all directions. "So? Where are we?" I asked.

"Well," Mom said. "I'd guess about half a month before the Big Bang, if time exists out here."

"What does that even mean?"

"What does it mean to you?" Dad said. "How do you *feel* this far out?"

"If we die, no one will find us," Teddy said, grinning.

"No," Mom said. "We wouldn't have existed. There'd be nothing to find."

We sat by Teddy's fire, eating hamburgers, thinking about that. It was funny how clearly I could smell the smoke from the fire, the oil in the car's engine cooling off, my mom's perfume—only the smells we brought with us. I switched on my flashlight and aimed it back in the direction we'd come

from—the future. Something winked in the light. A Doritos wrapper.

“In the beginning there was us,” I said into the silence.

Dad smiled. “Yep.”

The fire was dying. I waved the beam from my flashlight left and right, watching my family’s eyes follow it.

“Point it over there,” Dad said. He meant directly into the past. I swung the light around, lined it up, and held it steady. It felt creepy looking down the shaft of light at that bottomless, empty well. It was like we could fall into it.

“Nothing. Forever and ever,” Mom said.

“Let me try,” Teddy said, grabbing at the flashlight. He pointed it in the same direction and switched it off and on. “S.O.S.”

“Don’t cry wolf, honey,” Mom said.

“What? Why not? You just said—”

“We *are* lost,” I suggested.

Dad was about to disagree when Teddy yelled and dropped the flashlight. I’d seen it too—something out there. Dad jumped up and turned on the car’s headlights, blinding us momentarily. I squinted, then saw it again, a ... bird? It flew around our camp, landed on the car’s hood, then dropped something from its mouth.

“What the hell,” Dad said. The bird cocked its head, shit all over the hood, then flew off, back in time—back in the direction it’d come from. Dad slowly got out of the car, staring at the white streak running down the station wagon’s paint. Then he picked up something. “It’s a leaf.”

“What? Are you sure?” Mom said.

Teddy threw his hands up. “That thing came out of *nowhere*!”

“Literally,” I said.

Dad turned the leaf over, then handed it to Mom.

“It’s an olive leaf,” she said. “And that was a dove.”

“Pretty sure that was a pigeon, Mom,” I said.

“Why did it come from that way?” Teddy asked. “Isn’t the beginning of time the other way—where the street lamp was?”

“Maybe that wasn’t the beginning of time,” I said.

“So, wait,” Teddy said. “There was something *before* the Big Bang?”

“Or maybe this leaf isn’t part of time,” Mom said. “Or that dove.” She was smiling up at Dad, like he’d done something right.

Teddy wasn’t listening. “I bet the bird saw my S.O.S.,” he said. “It’s trying to help us! Let’s follow it.”

Dad clearly liked that idea. “Jeanne? Aren’t you curious?”

Mom looked into the past, “Yes.”

That was not what I expected. The situation was officially out of control—I couldn’t be out of touch in the middle of nowhere and abandon Sandy. “I’m the only one who thinks this is a bad idea?” I said. “Let’s go to the Visitor’s Center and tell somebody about the *pigeon*—that ranger, let him figure it out! Plus, all our clothes and suitcases and stuff are floating away, we could barely follow them back *now*—this is *dangerous*. And we have nothing left. Are we going to start tossing out parts of the car next?”

“That’s a good idea,” said Teddy.

“If we don’t go back—”

“It’ll be okay, Jill. Listen. Your father may have found something special.”

“Mom, this is crazy. I want to go back—now!” They were all looking at me. Mom’s right eyebrow started to rise. *Stay cool*.

“Let’s sleep on it,” Dad said.



When Teddy and I woke up, Dad had already packed the car. Mom dragged our sleeping bags out of the tent and tried to tickle us.

“What are you doing? I’m sixteen!”

But Teddy liked it, and soon I was laughing, too.

“Where are we going?” Teddy asked, once we were back in the car.

Dad handed him the leaf. “Where did the bird get this?”

“A tree? Land!” Teddy said.

“Let’s go find that land.”

“Or it’s just a leaf,” I said. “Can’t we go back where there’s people?” I knew it was hopeless.

“You mean *boys*,” Teddy said. He had no idea. Sandy was the priority, but arguing was pointless.

“Please, I want to go back,” I said. “I really don’t like it out here.”

“Don’t worry, just a quick detour,” Mom said, smiling at me and glancing at the phone in my hand. “It’ll be good for you. That bird couldn’t have flown far.”

Mom and Dad must have made up last night, I thought, *yuck*.

But she was right, another five minutes driving and we saw light, dim at first, then brighter—a sun, three planets—one, a blue-green marble with clouds we soon passed through—then an ocean, land, and trees.

“Over there!” Teddy said. It was a good spot.

Dad parked our station waggon on the beach. I took my shoes off and got out. The sand was warm. I burrowed my toes in and walked down to the water's edge. I was hungry.

"Swim? You love swimming," Dad said, standing next to me.

"I don't want to be here."

He looked hurt. "Are you sure? This is once-in-a-lifetime kind-of stuff." He glanced at Mom. She shook her head and he gave up. Dad and Teddy stripped down to their shorts and ran into the waves.

"Where are we, Mom?" I asked.

"Don't know," she said, sitting down next to me. She started peeling an orange, then handed me half of it.

"Do you think anyone else has been here?" I said.

"Maybe everyone has."

"What? Please make sense."

"I just think this place feels familiar. Doesn't it feel familiar?"

Mom was getting weird. "I don't know. Maybe. We'll probably be here forever, so—plenty of time to figure it out!" I checked my phone again. "I'm going for a walk," I said.

"What's up, Jill? Something else is bothering you."

"I just have to go to the bathroom."

"Fine—go poop. But you're going to tell me before we leave."

I ran back to the car, stuffed a roll of toilet paper in my purse, then headed up into the dunes. I actually did have to go, and Mom telling me to poop always made it worse. At home she'd say, "Go poop, then go to your room," whenever she thought I was acting "bratty."

I scrambled to top of the dunes, then turned around to catch my breath. The beach was stunning—no sign of people, besides my family. It was low tide, emerald; a line of seaweed piled up about fifty yards from the waves, some terns hunted in the tidal zone. *The bird*. I looked towards the woods—movement in the branches there. Teddy would love it if I found that bird. And it would be more private under the trees anyway. I trudged inland, thinking about Sandy.

She'd spent all night in jail, unless her parents bailed her out, which was unlikely. *I should have bailed her out*. I had enough money. The irony made my head swim. Maybe if I acted sick, Dad would take me back. All the feelings were starting to hurt. I'd abandoned Sandy. Lied to Mom. And now I was trying to trick my family into going home. I was *plotting*, straining to hold it together. I was the one ruining our vacation now—everyone else was having



fun. Dad was happy and I was disappointing him, or at the very least missing out. I wanted to go swimming, too!

“Hey.” I spun around. A boy stared at me from the far side of a stream. He carried a cloth bag overflowing with mushrooms, and something shiny swung on his neck—a glass lens. Simple, dirty sandals, a grey robe tied at the waist with a rope. Pretty eyes, curly hair, a couple years older than me. Probably not a customer.

“Hi,” I said.

“What’s that?”

I looked down at my right hand. “Toilet paper,” I said.

“What’s it for?”

So embarrassing. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

He just stared at me.

“I ... need to poop.” *Rock. Bottom.*

“Oh. There’s a pit.” He stepped lightly over the stream and approached me. He looked at my ears (my earrings?), down at my shoes, then pointed at a rough trail. “I can show you.”

“No, no. No. Thank you.” I could smell the sun in his sweat, the earth and mushrooms. “All good.” I took a step back, then followed the path while he watched me leave.

He wasn’t kidding about the “pit.” I mean, I’ve been in some F-minus privies—this took the cake. But I made it happen and walked back to the stream to wash my hands. I felt so much better. The boy was cutting something off a tree with his knife. I walked over to him and he held it out to me.

“No thanks,” I said. “So do you live around here?”

“Of course.”

“With your family?”

“We look after the olive trees.”

“What about a phone, do you have a phone? My family—we’re lost, and my friend needs my help. She got caught selling fake IDs, and it’s my fault. Well, it’s her fault, really—she’s the brains.” I dug in my purse, then handed him my fake ID—a photo of me with the name Jill Doe. “See, it’s not real. I made it.”

He frowned at the ID, rubbed it between his fingers. “This is real.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty good. But, nope—it’s fake. My last name isn’t Doe. It’s a joke. Jill is my first name. You can keep it, I’ve got copies.”

The boy looked concerned. “The cosmos is built on truth, on real things like this.” He held up the ID. “That’s all it is, in the end.”

I stared at the image of my younger self. “But I’m not actually twenty-one—

it's a lie."

The boy turned the ID over. "Even so. This is part of creation now." He lifted a white mushroom from his bag. "*Amanita virosa*, The Destroying Angel. Young, still enclosed in its universal veil, do you see? Easily mistaken for *calvatia gigantea*—a puffball. Older specimens falsely identify as *agaricus campestris* or *agaricus arvensis*—meadow or horse mushrooms. Deadly poisonous in all forms and guises." He touched my photo. "Beautiful and very real, like Jill Doe."

I blushed, and tried not to laugh. So was my ID poisonous? Was I? What was his point? That I was like a puffball? C+ flirt so far. "I can make you one. How old are you?"

The boy looked confused. "My age?"

"Yeah, so you can drink. Like beer, wine. The good stuff. You have to be twenty-one."

"We are all eternal."

"What?" Our eyes met—spiral flecks of gold spun in his pupils. What had I been worried about earlier? It didn't matter—I missed my family, suddenly. Plus it didn't feel like a sale. I needed to get back to the beach. "What about a phone? Like this, but one that actually works?"

He looked at the phone in my hand, then untied one of his pouches and pulled out a wooden box.

"What's that?"

"It will help you find your way." He opened the lid. It was just a compass.

"Yeah, sure—I'll take that." He hesitated. "Oh, you want something in return? I can't give you my phone." He looked down. "The toilet paper? Yeah, sure. Hey, I should probably get back. What's your name?"

"Jack."

"Nice to meet you, Jack. Ha, Jack and Jill!" I laughed.

He smiled, but looked confused again.

"Jack and Jill ... come on, you know—roll up the hill? Or down the hill. I think it's down the hill—because their heads get cut off and roll down the hill. Or it could be up the hill, if you're going back in time."

Now he looked alarmed.

"Oh, it's okay—just a nursery rhyme. For kids. It's not about us." Us. So awkward. "I'm going to go now." And with that, I left Jack by the stream, holding the half-roll of toilet paper and my fake ID.



They were feeding bread to seagulls and pigeons when I got back. The sun was going down. It was so beautiful.

“Feel better?”

“Yes.” She always asks me. “I found an angel. You were hoping for something like that, right? It was a mushroom, but still.”

Mom smiled. “Well, you were right, Jill. And the bird was just a pigeon. This can still be our little slice, but it’s time to go back.”

*Thank you, Mom.* “Oh, I also met a boy in the woods. His name is Jack.”

“Jack and Jill?” Teddy laughed.

“He was really cute.”

“I know you’re a teenager, Jill. But I was a teenager once—I don’t remember being such a flirt.”

“Jesus, Mom! He only wanted my toilet paper. He gave me this compass.” I handed it to Dad. “Can we use it to get back?”

Dad poked at the rusted iron needle. “It’d be pretty strange if this thing didn’t point at the densest object in the universe, once we hit the road.”

“The Big Bang!” Teddy yelled.

“You got it, bud.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how a compass works,” I mumbled.

“I knew you’d figure it out, honey.” Mom said to Dad. But she was looking at me. *Not off the hook.*

The fake IDs were real. I was going to have to tell her about Sandy, and there was going to be a shit show. But, you know what? That was okay. Actually, I couldn’t wait to relieve myself.

~ May, 2016





## Babies are astronauts

IT'S SPRING and the baby  
squirrel is adrift above

the forest floor, there's less  
gravity here—so

he kicks mid jump  
like an astronaut trying

to grow heavy  
enough for this place

rimmed with flowers  
and gorgeous things

with wings.

~ May, 2016





## The relocation plan

WHEN THEY CAME TO Earth to save us, the first thing they did was divide us into groups based on our first names, for relocation. Protests flared up—families got separated—but there wasn't time to argue. The Doomsday asteroid was already huge in the sky, so we had no choice but to follow their instructions if we wanted to get off Earth before it was obliterated.

My name is Aaden—so I was one of the first to understand what it really meant to be divided up alphabetically. For each planet they found to settle, one relocation group was allowed off the ship. Otherwise, they said, it got too confusing. So that's how I ended up on planet Earth2-aaden, or "E2-aaden," with about 4,000 other people named Aaden.

The joke, "Hey Aaden!" got old pretty fast.

If I got tired of talking to other Aadens and wanted to visit my sister, Trisha, or any of the other 8,000 Trishas in existence, I had to catch one of the monthly freighters to E2-trisha, which takes a year. It almost wasn't worth the trip because our visas only allowed week-long visits. Needless to say, I didn't end up spending much time with my sister, since other Trishas deserved my attention, too.

On that note, there were no women on E2-aaden when it was originally settled, Aaden being the manly name it is. Mercifully, a coalition of women on other E2 planets organized the donation of unwanted daughters to our planet, in exchange for unwanted sons. So the situation was being corrected, at least for the youngest generations—and the process of transferring those babies was in fact straightforward: baby girls simply had to be named Aaden, and baby boys named Tricia, for example, and the bureaucracy kicked in. But for us old dogs stuck out there on E2-aaden, or E2-mike, or E2-frank, we were S.O.L.

That's how the war started, funny enough. Even after we explained it to

them, they still didn't understand why we shouldn't be grouped alphabetically. They said it would be absolute chaos in their database otherwise, and they were some seriously stubborn bastards. We will always be grateful to them for saving us from annihilation, but sometimes the details really do matter.

*~ May, 2016*

## Paper

**I**s it you I'm staring at,  
or a drawing? The car  
races by—

hits a punch hole and tears  
apart on a white sheet of asphalt.

I rush over with my pencil  
and eraser, not sure which  
to use.

I can see the wail  
of sirens already scrawled  
in letters on the sky.

*~ July, 2020*





## Moon citadel

Under different skies, what games  
do the dead play? What languages do  
they speak? I teach Clara who I barely see,  
tonight, what a noun is, what a moon is—

pointing to three of them—and my name.  
She stands barefoot on the fountain,  
pennies sparkle under her dress. What  
can I offer her? Does it occur to me, then,

who she might have been? Who she is  
now? She quietly watches me fail  
to teach her anything. I came here to be alone,  
to leave my fears, by releasing them—so

I give them up now, to Clara.

*~ July, 2017*





## Cave woman

WE'D SPENT DAYS in the cave—thirty miles underground, according to the instruments—and air quality was poor. My men were ready to head back, but the job wasn't done and the pay was good so we pushed on in darkness.

It was strange to see a light in the passage—I told the others to stay put and crawled toward its source. The walls widened and I entered a large chamber, forty feet high, which contained, among other things, a gigantic woman hunched over, rubbing the hollow of a rock with her thumbs. She was doing the dishes, I realized, after a few moments watching, and her low humming echoed in the cave. She was profoundly naked, the forty or fifty foot length of her, although her skin was spotted with calcified moles. Light emanated from phosphorescent goo the woman had set on the rock next to her—its light didn't throw far, and I was able to dismiss myself unnoticed.

"There's a large woman in a sort of room down there," I told my men. "Forty, maybe fifty feet tall. Doing the dishes."

"Maybe it's time we all go home," one of the others suggested.

I looked back down the hall towards the light. "Yeah. Okay."

*~ January, 2016*





## Essay: A Case for the Multiverse

Subatomic Matter and the Multiplicity of Dark Energy Densities

THE GENIE LOOKED tired. He glanced past the boy and out the door of the tent at the dusty marketplace. “I haven’t heard that kind of wish in a long time.”

“So you can’t do it?”

“Oh I can do it.”

The boy slumped back into an old chair. Earlier that week, he’d overheard his stepfather wish his mother dead in that very tent, and now she was deathly ill. The boy had come to wish her healthy again. But he wrinkled his brow, troubled. “If a wish can be undone by another wish, what good is it? What if my stepfather unwishes *my* wish?”

“No one’s wish is undone. Your stepfather will get his wish.”

The boy jumped up. “But you said—you lied!”

“I do not lie, boy.”

“How is it possible? My stepfather has wished her dead, and I wish that she lives. Either she lives or dies—which is it? Both can’t be true.”

“Long ago, yes, there was a single truth, when the universe was whole. Men’s wishes tore it apart—like you will tear apart this world with your wish.”

“What?”

“I can only grant your wish by making another world—a world where your stepfather never made his wish.”

The boy was dumbfounded and shook his head in disbelief. “A whole world for a single wish?”

“Not only. I must remake the stars, and all the hidden mysteries of heaven.”

The boy thought for a while. “So if I wish that she lives, she will both live and die—she will die here, and live in a new world with me?”

“Both wishes must be fulfilled.” The genie squinted down at the boy and crossed his arms.

“But I will know she has died here. No! Genie, I wish that she live in all

worlds!”

The Genie froze, his eyes wide. *What a mess they’ve made with their wishes,* he thought. *What a mess for someone, someday, to try and untangle.*

~ September, 2016

## *Either, or*

The dog barked  
or she ripped a sheet of paper in half.  
Behind the house either

a dog is barking  
or she is ripping paper.

The car peeled out  
or she stood back and screamed.  
Behind the house either

a car is peeling out  
or she is screaming.

*~ May, 2016*





## Minute mystery

THEY ARE ALL SIX sitting at a circular table. The floorboards are covered in blood, but no one is dead, and Jack didn't miss. Jack is loading his gun again. The other players are staring at Jack like they want to kill him. What was Jack's mistake?

~ February, 2016

Answer: Jack and the others are werewolves playing a game of Russian Roulette. Jack forgot to load a silver bullet along with the lead bullets in the first round.





## A misunderstanding

**M**Y GRANDFATHER TAUGHT ME to kill a fish one of two ways—*either strike its head with the wooden rim of your fish net, or insert your knife between its eyes and poke at its brain.* Neither method is foolproof or especially humane in practice. But that's the pretext, of course—a swift death.

Now that I'm on my own, I toss trout large enough to keep into my kayak's forward storage compartment, snap the lid on, and wait for them to suffocate. Cowardly, he'd say. *Cruel.* My ex-wife was the first to do it that way—we both listened to a trout bang around for almost twenty minutes in her boat. "Maybe there's a little water in there," I said. "It's so horrible," was all Jill said, and we grimaced at each other.

So I wasn't surprised to find my catch for the day still flopping in the hull after I'd dragged the kayak into some weeds. I scooped him into my lunch bag and trudged up the hill toward the cabin. It did surprise me, however, to find the fish still alive in the sink almost half an hour later, after I'd taken a shower and started a fire. He was still trying to breathe—raising his gills and tail into the air like a halfhearted appeal for mercy. I put him on a cutting board and found my fillet knife—I'd seen my grandfather fillet a wriggling fish only seconds after he'd reeled it in. *Set your blade behind the pectoral fin, perpendicular to the length of the body. Cut diagonally toward the base of the skull. Repeat on the opposite side, then bend its neck to snap the spine and separate the head from the body.*

But I paused, tapping his skin with the knife. This was a beautiful fish, a young three-pound brownie with red spots painted across a dark pink and yellow-green belly. His eyes wandered the room. Why wasn't he dying? Why wasn't he already dead? I put the knife down, settled into my recliner, and glanced at the clock on the wall. 7:22 pm. Garrison Keillor was on the radio, so I listened to that, checking the time now and then. I grew incredulous—it

wasn't possible—until, I had to, I accepted the fact—the fish was breathing air—and around 8:45 pm I decided not to kill him. Instead, I wondered what he might like to eat.

I found a carrot in the fridge, and the lemon and parsley I'd been planning to garnish him with. He wasn't interested in the carrot, which was disappointing—I imagined him nibbling at it like a rabbit—and he was startled and unhappy when I dribbled lemon onto his mouth. I also had the horse-hair lures my grandfather left me, but no fresh insects—just dusty flies and dried spiders on the windowsill—so I went around the back of the cabin to dig for worms.

Jill's bike was still back there, under a tarp—it'd be there until I moved it, I realized. The tires were flat, and the rusted chain caught and stuck in the chainstay when I cranked the pedals. What a waste, she'd barely ridden it. The whole thing had been a waste with her. But it was Jill who found the cabin and encouraged me to buy it; and Reservoir Pond was a sanctuary—loons called out over the water at night and there was a beaver den at the north end. The Appalachian Trail crossed a quarter mile up the dirt road, and in the other direction was Cummins Pond, ringed by cross-country ski trails. A paradise, if I could just forget. Jill said it was my temper, that I should look in a mirror—to see myself when I got mad.

How long had I stood there? I looked down at the empty Styrofoam cup, recalled my guest, then discovered a clew of Nightcrawlers near the woodshed. Fat ones.

Wilbur loved that—I decided to call him Wilbur—he slurped up two worms and relaxed. I microwaved myself a potato and garnished it with the lemon and parsley and nibbled on the carrot—I had nothing else to eat.

About 2 am, I woke upset by a dream—someone angry with me?—and wandered the moonlit cabin. Wilbur's eyes glittered at me from the table; he was awake, too. I brought him back to bed and arranged him on the other side of the mattress—where Jill used to lie—and he stared at me, gills fanning out. He didn't have any eyelids to close, but I could tell when he drifted into a trance-like sleep. *What a helpless thing.* I made a silent promise to look after him.

It didn't seem right to go fishing the next day, so we rode in my old Dodge down to the country store. I fit Wilbur into a large inner pocket on my fishing vest so he could peek out as we browsed the aisles; he picked out a can of SpaghettiOs and a rubber frog, but the Smith's two-year-old spotted him from her mom's shopping cart and started pointing—so I zipped up. *What will they*

think? *You should have killed it*, I imagined my grandfather say.

Wilbur was squirmy in the checkout line, and on the drive home it occurred to me he might want a bit more independence.

I filled the tub after lunch, tossed in the frog with some other bath toys, and set Wilbur into the water. He floated, sweeping his tail back and forth, then surveyed the toys—suddenly so fast, delighted, darting around. But—something was wrong! He convulsed, splashing water onto my pants and the floor. I snatched him out of the tub; a moment later water popped from his mouth and gills.

I'd almost drowned him.

I sat back, dumbfounded. Wilbur couldn't breathe water anymore? Was it my fault? How was it my fault? "What kind of fish are you!" I yelled at him. His eyes searched out mine, mouth curving down in an awful frown. *There's that temper*. "I'm sorry, Wilbur. I was scared—that's all. Angry at myself." I wrapped him in a dishtowel until he stopped shivering. "What are we going to do with you?"

We needed a Plan B. I sat in my recliner brainstorming, then went out to the shed and mocked up a quick prototype—a wooden car roughly the same length as Wilbur, with an old door hinge in the middle and a groove I could slip him into, a "Wilbur-slot." I put Wilbur in the car and put the car on the kitchen floor.

"Come on, Wilbur," I said. "Give it a go." He stared up at me, then at the bank of cabinets in front of him, and swung his tail to the left. The hinge squeaked, pivoted, and the car rolled forward, just as I'd hoped. "That's it! You got it, keep going." It took some trial and error, but after fifteen minutes, Wilbur had propelled himself out of the kitchen and across the uneven floorboards of the hallway. He even made it over the quarter-inch drop that separated the bathroom from the bedroom. Carpets were the enemy; twice he ended up stranded in the living room, once much too close to the fireplace.

I scattered SpaghettiOs and a couple Nightcrawlers around the kitchen, oiled his hinge, then watched with pride as Wilbur rolled his way around and gobbled them all up. I caught myself wishing Jill was there to see it—then doubting she'd care.

I let Wilbur explore on his own while I kid-proofed the cabin, but he got underfoot and began following me around, so I had to be careful.

"Let's get some fresh air," I said when I was done. "We both deserve a break." I scooped him up and headed down to the dock—I thought Wilbur might like to get a bird's eye view of his old home.



We were alone. I set Wilbur on his towel, propped against my thermos, so he could gaze over the windswept surface of the lake. A handfull of minnows nibbled on algae. I tried to imagine what Wilbur was feeling—what if the situation was reversed? What if I was trapped under the lake, staring up at my cabin, unable to breathe air, watching neighbors walk by? It was a lonely thought. Or maybe Wilbur felt more like an astronaut out on a spacewalk, orbiting the watery planet that bore him. I had an urge to capture the moment—just a quick snapshot—but I'd forgotten my camera. "Wait here," I told him, and jogged up to the cabin. When I got back, the Miller's little girl, Amy, was at the end of the dock, swinging her legs in the water.

"I let it go," she said when she saw me looking at Wilbur's empty towel. "I'm a vegetarian. My dad says I can let fish go if I promise to be a vegetarian."

I absorbed this information as I knelt next to Amy, trying to control my emotions.

"Amy, did you put my fish in the water?"

"I didn't want it to die."

"That was a special fish. It dies when you put it in the water." A look of horror crept across Amy's face. "But it's not your fault," I added quickly. "It was a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" She whimpered. "I didn't kill it?"

I couldn't help myself, and my hands were starting to shake. "Well, yes, you did kill ... *him*, Amy." I sighed. "Wilbur. His name was Wilbur." With that she was off, wailing, tripping hazardingly up the dock, and then up the long driveway to her family's house.

I got down on my hands and knees and peered into the muddy water, at my bobbing reflection—the massive gnarled forehead, bulging eyes. "Wilbur?" I reached down until I felt the slime of the lakebed, then dragged my hands all around under the dock, but it was useless. He must have swum off before blacking out and suffocating.

I lay back and stared at the sky. There were a few clouds.

*I told you—don't be a coward. Look what's happened.*

After twenty minutes or so, I heard footsteps and glanced over towards the Miller's place. Jack, Amy's father, was striding down his driveway. I listened to him walking down the dock and then saw him standing over me. "What the hell, Bill?"

All I had to do was control my temper.

~ January, 2016





## Useless

On that side of the window  
a robot rides your horse through the desert.  
It dismounts, pulls a door open  
and kisses your child in his car seat.

On this side of the window  
you swim down the lane of an endless  
pool, in outer space.

On that side of the window  
the robot chases your child through  
a field of flowers, and sits down satisfied  
at your computer, to go to work.

On this side of the window  
you step out of endlessness and back  
into it, you are walking nowhere, not  
dead, but useless.

*~ January, 2016*





## Evolution, inside-out

BEN WATCHED SMALL BIRDS flying towards him, or away from him (he wasn't sure which anymore) from his back porch—until it became obvious that it was at least *possible* time was not moving forward—that, in-line with his calculations—it had reversed millions of years earlier and was now flowing backward.

At first, it hadn't made any sense. *If it's true*, Ben thought, *as I watch these birds—why are their beaks pointing in the right direction? Shouldn't they look like they're flying backwards?* Or why, for that matter, did Ben's own feet point in the direction he was walking—if he was actually walking backwards? Why was his face on the “front” of his head? He'd burst out laughing at himself for taking his mathematical theory so seriously. Other times he'd remember his professor's lectures on evolution, and wonder: *if my theory is true—and natural selection is how organisms evolve relative to time—then maybe they've evolved to move backwards through time.* But how long had it taken for bodies to adapt? How many generations? Fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers—how many deformed, twisted, tortured ancestors had it taken—after time had slowed, stopped, and then began its slow march backward? Birds' beaks shortening from one generation to the next, blunting, inverting, evolving just as they always had—whole heads forced slowly, child after child, back through their bodies, each species' DNA ripping itself apart in a gruesome back-flip—our own human faces sliding inch by inch up our foreheads, back over the tops of our skulls, generations of us staring at the sky in confusion, until finally, finally, we had adapted—our bodies aligned again with the flow of time. *That's insane*, Ben thought. *These are insane thoughts.*

That night an owl landed on the bannister and spun its neck around to stare at Ben—whose cat move silently towards the owl on digitigrade knees.

~ May, 2016





## *Sleeping in dirt*

I

A swamp of white  
stars, hours walking in the dark.  
You find a place to sleep on the dirt  
close to an old engineer.

Wash off on a rock by the water.  
Your flashlight is dead but you  
can see in all directions from  
under your tarp. You always feel safe  
lying down in plain sight anywhere  
in the woods. You slept by a bear's  
den at Sisters in Oregon, footprints  
and scat everywhere, and again in NoCal.  
You slept on rocks, on gravel, on grass,  
on snow, just keep walking,  
watch the storms and fires fill the  
sky, it shouldn't feel so safe,  
but it does.

II

Sleep next to a fence in the  
parking lot at an amusement park,  
watch the lights blink out  
on the ferris wheel. Close your eyes—  
imagine you're in a bed in a house

and someone is taking care of you, maybe  
loves you, fed you, and will be there  
in the morning. But all you have  
is the dew on the grass, the fence,  
the old ferris wheel and trash can,  
and it's time to start walking.

You sleep on the runway of an  
airport in Tehachapi, you sleep  
in a maintenance shed at a wind farm  
so you can beg for microwavable breakfast  
burritos. You sleep up on a mountain  
where it's too windy and you can see  
the Sierras, covered in snow, and you listen  
to the kids, all the bragging. You want  
to brag too, sometimes you do.

### III

Lie still in your sleeping bag, to trap  
heat—you need sleep. It's dangerous  
to be tired and make bad decisions.  
You sleep in hostels next to kids  
in college, vets, next to old men,  
guys like you—organized, who don't  
talk, stuck in some kind of loop—some  
who want attention and some who don't.  
You walk into small towns, when  
everyone's asleep, everything is closed,  
you lie down to sleep behind trees on  
the side of the road. You have your routine,  
your penny stove, the things you need  
to keep you comfortable.

Why does it matter where you sleep? You're always  
fine. You put your headphones on and walk  
into the Sierras, way too early in the season,  
in your long johns because those are your only

warm clothes. It's raining and snowing off  
and on, your sneakers soak up water and freeze  
into blocks around your feet. Your friends are  
gone, lost in a squall. Days pass. A gruesome storm  
is growing at you from the south, and you can't walk  
any further because the snow is too deep and soft.

#### IV

So you dig down to the dirt, pitch your tarp  
and get into your bivy and sleeping bag.  
You're so tired, warming up, it's cozy.  
You've still got two days food but it's a seven  
day hike to the trailhead.

No one told you the beginning of dying might be  
a mistake you made days earlier. Now you have time  
to think about all you could have done differently.  
There might be a way out—you could go back.  
It's only a four days hike to go back. But you're  
going to go forward, because you're on your own,  
and there's no one to talk you out of it, no one to worry  
about or feel responsible for. Your life doesn't feel real,  
when you hold it in your hands like this.  
You get to lie there in the dirt as it starts to snow,  
and your tarp gets heavy and dark above you, the storm  
could drop ten feet of snow, you have no cell service,  
no weather report, no one else, and you get to sleep  
all night, and nibble on a granola bar, you get to sleep  
in like a teenager who doesn't want to go to school,  
even when you know you should get up at 3 am  
and strike out while the snow is frozen, so you can  
walk on top of it. But you don't, and so you get to fight  
for your life when the sun comes up, and everything  
is sparkling and gorgeous and melting and you sink—  
right to the bottom.

*~ August, 2019*







## The friend I can't remember

I HAVE A FRIEND I can't remember. It's not his fault—I get that sense anyway—and it must be frustrating for him, too. Every day I meet him for a long lunch, and I remember everything—really everything—except him. I remember walking down 78th street, across Riverside Park, under the West Side Highway, and down to the Boat House. I remember what I order for lunch—usually a bratwurst—the view of the dark Hudson over the railing, my boss's boat docked along the pier. I remember the distracted waiter, if it's crowded or not, and the paper plate, plastic fork, knife, and the hamburger set opposite me. And even though I don't remember my friend or what we talk about, he relaxes me. I leave our lunches feeling relieved, less alone—like I know I've got someone in my corner, like he really listened to me.

I must tell him all about my life. Of course I can't be sure—but I always plan to unburden myself. That must be what I do, that must be what we talk about.

~ February, 2016



## The emperor's new clothes

THE PARADE was finally over—only the captain and emperor remained in the throne room. The sound of boots faded, and the emperor raised his head.

“Kill him.”

“Yes, Majesty. The boy?”

“No, not the boy—of course not the boy. Am I a monster? The weaver, tomorrow at noon. And make sure he's wearing these *beautiful* clothes when his head rolls.” The emperor flicked at an invisible sleeve. “Now help me out of this shirt.”

“Sir?”

“Oh for Christ's sake. You too? Give me your hand. Grab hold of the cuff.”

“But sir—oh. There's ... there's something here.”

“You can't see it because you're stupid. The buttons are in the back.”

The captain groped in the air behind the emperor until his fingers found a cold, perfectly smooth button. He rolled it between his fingers. “Incredible. You can see these clothes?”

“No—I can't.”

The captain paused.

“Get it off of me!”

“Sorry, sir. It's just—well, you said men who couldn't see the clothing—”

“—were unfit for their position or hopelessly stupid. Yes, I did say that. That's what the weaver said.”

“Then there must be something wrong with the clothes, because—because no one saw them! Not even the little boy.”

“Yes, that must be it,” the emperor said, rolling his eyes.

~ July, 2017





## Possum

**Y**ou want to know what it feels like? It starts in my heart—a stiffness that radiates out suddenly—like a meteor hit me—the shock wave flattens my lungs and travels over my shoulders and down past my hips like a curse, like I’m being turned to stone, past my elbows and knees, filling my hands and fingertips and toes with rock. If I’m standing, I tip over and hit the world and it shatters, or I shatter—and that’s it, I’m dead.

Then I wake up—sometimes I’m somewhere else, dragged a short distance, and my fur is dirty, or it’s night, or raining, maybe a few hours have past, maybe days. If my parents find me first, they put flowers around me, and read stories to me, and sleep next to me, wishing I will come back.

*~ August, 2019*





## Writers' shortcut

**I**t is foolish  
to write a book if—in that book—  
a man is writing a book.

When he gets writers' block, you get it.  
And when you get it, he gets it.

*Hmm, he thinks—and this will  
make it way worse—what if my book  
is about a man writing a book?  
And—he has an idea!*

~ July, 2017