

CHILDREN OF OBSCURA

This Mysterious Human



PROSE POEMS

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Preface

The universe may have had suspicions about what it was to become. Mathematicians and physicists know that hidden in a few simple rules are complexities that become worlds. I offer these poems as mirrors to that original intuition. Each prose poem an *assay*, to use Jane Hirshfield's metallurgic word, to investigate the nearly fourteen billion years it's taken to produce life on Earth and we obscure human beings.

As the astronomer Edward Robert Harrison says, "Hydrogen . . . given enough time, turns into people." We, the children of this brief moment on an enigmatic globe with a random cosmic address, are perhaps flowering into something the universe wanted more than anything. The anthropomorphic language itself is a product of this flowering, this arrogance and tenderness of language.

Perhaps the universe itself desires every hint of its own liveliness. Including us, the children of such obscura. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "Everything, in some extremely attenuated extension of itself, has existed from the very first."

Even if only as a twinkle in the dark eye of that first singularity.

How to Build a Human

*We pass our existence within this warm wobble of flesh
and yet take it almost entirely for granted.*

—Bill Bryson

The miracle is that a jumble of inert chemicals & atoms makes you, somehow, *you*. For five bucks in 1960s money, says a chemistry teacher in Iowa, *everything you'd need could be bought in a hardware store*. Though the list has grown: Fifty-nine elements are ultimately needed, including trace amounts of vanadium, manganese, tin & copper. The thirty pounds of carbon today would fetch nearly \$70,000, but mostly you'd just need oxygen & and hydrogen, a \$40 tab with inflation. It's the strangest thing in the universe, he says: We're sentient dirt. We may come cheap, but you couldn't build one of us even if you tried.

Miracles

My body just made a million red blood cells this second. Seven octillion atoms, mysteriously, stay in the general shape of *me*, despite the flimsy border between *self* and *world*. Just as fabulous are my lungs, whose airways would travel from coast to coast if stretched. The double helix of DNA, unraveled, would extend beyond Pluto. Meanwhile, there's much to complain about. My back hurts, and why didn't God make better knees? Besides, there's nothing on television, and tomorrow's going to look much the same as today.

When the zebra fish damages its heart, it grows new tissue. This would have helped me, too. Yet my atoms do gravitate toward my wife's luminous body—or on philosophical days, are lost in Pluto's orbit. There's a fine line between complaint and prayer. A million red blood cells, every minute, carry both down ventricle and capillary. It's a miracle I don't think it a miracle at all.

Identity

To produce *me*, the universe made DNA with astonishing fidelity: only one error per every billion letters copied. Occasionally, evolution occurs, but only *because* of tiny errors. Much of it is pointless (if there is such a notion in the cosmos); still, *error* is the only way to get to *me* from the primordial soup. Scientists say I've been alive since the beginning in unbroken lineage, a personal line of descent from three billion years ago. One error after another.

Parents, though, aren't completely to blame: Each of us has a hundred personal mutations untraceable to either one. If there's something wrong with me, it's only that I didn't stay primordial. The mouth is a fabulous error. Even now, I have no idea what I'm saying or what I really am.

Mysteries

Science is puzzled about fingerprints. What imperative led to these spiral whorls, and why do they wrinkle after long baths? I'd assumed by now someone knew. Itching, too—no one can yet say why we're so suggestible; even saying the word *itch* starts a cascade of sensations in the mind of the reader. Can you feel it? The *phantom itch* when a limb is amputated, or the insatiability Buddha spoke of.

A woman in Massachusetts, after a bout of shingles, rubbed her forehead furiously till, one morning, she'd rubbed through skull bone to her brain. Perhaps mystery is etched in these hieroglyphs of ridged fingertips. Lurking like a phantom in the beginning: an itch that needed scratching, the whorl imprinting finger and thumb like a tattoo.

The Koan of Skin

It looks after us. Keeps our insides in and bad things out. Thinnest on eyelids, thickest on heels and hands. Where we meet the world, we're composed only of dead cells, shed almost carelessly, a million wafers every hour. A pound of dust trails behind the body each year, like clues in a fairytale. We're full of holes, too: millions of hair follicles, each a way in and a way out. Corpuscles in the dermis keep us intimately in touch with the world. Heat, breezes, vibrations—we are never not a part of everything.

The most sensitive are the fingertips, lips, tongue, clitoris, penis. The brain, however, doesn't know a damn thing about how something feels—just how it *ought* to feel. The same touch by lover or stranger evokes vastly different worlds. Who knew the reason you can't tickle yourself is that you know too much?

Color

The cadaver yields a sliver of skin a millimeter thick, peeled back for the students to see, so thin as to be translucent. The pathologist says, *This is where all your skin color resides*. Biologically, this is what race is: a flowering of pigment, as though we are beautiful, never hated. As though beauty could seep through corpuscle and artery, up the spine the skull sits on like a throne, and illumine what sits there, a gray ghost, a petty king.

Choreography

Staring at my hand, I imagine its twenty-nine bones, seventeen muscles—eighteen more in the forearm to control it—the two main arteries, three major nerves plus forty-five others, and one hundred twenty-three ligaments. To write these words, scratch my eyebrow, uproot weeds, love my wife, not pull a trigger takes as much delicacy and precision as the cosmos choreographing its orbits.

Proof enough, the old philosophers thought, of divine design. For me, it's enough to feel the two hundred thirty-seven dancers of my hand intertwine with yours, flawlessly.

The Irony of Ennui

The trauma surgeon swivels the cadaver's wrist for the student to see. *A thing of beauty*, he says: Everything must squeeze through this narrow passage—blood, nerves, muscles—yet be mobile at the same time. Waving goodbye, turning a key in a lock, changing a light bulb—each gesture a magnificent feat of engineering. Cartilage is smoother than glass yet not brittle, doesn't crack under pressure. *You grow it yourself. It's a living thing.* Bone, too—fills a break, leaves no scar; transmits sound, secretes a hormone to influence mood, memory, fertility.

Who knew I was such a marvel? The most advanced technology on Earth right here inside me, while I complain of boredom, flip channels with a wrist that life has spent billions of years crafting just for me.