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Steven Hill

### Why Time Cannot Be Measured

*Pick chop Chop pick  
Chip chip chip  
Chip chop  
Chop pick*

Whew!

Now here is a specimen, the likes of which I have not seen in  
all my years of study.

By what trick of Nature is it painted azure blue?

Such a bright, joyful blue

with sparkling luster and perfect monoclinic crystal growth,  
that makes me pause at the infinite  
improvisation all around.

How long has it lain in this spot, waiting, watching,  
only to be pried from its post by my geologic hammer?

What wisdom could have foreseen this  
    chance meeting in time and space,  
    a coincidence of coordinates,  
axes X, Y, and Z that agree so precisely  
among the barren landscape of this  
greatly sculpted hole?  
Is the vehicle one of accident or design?  
And whose design?

I wonder, I wonder...

...And the layer upon which I stand  
is older than any primatal descendent of woman or man,  
And the crimson strata down below is  
hundreds of millions of years old,  
borne from a time when the grey Atlantic closed  
    shop for the season  
and drifted to a close.

    And what were the reasons, what were the reasons?  
    They must have been ones of advantage.

Is this what Hutton hinted at, centuries ago,<sup>1</sup>  
when he drew back the curtain on obstinate orthodoxies  
    and awakened the slumber of dogmatic minds?  
So many clues by the trained eye to be found,  
as the switchbacks, the switchbacks grind endlessly down,  
down into the swelter of this arid hell-hole, the  
crunch of clay under dusty boots echoing louder,  
the trail of abandoned signs, hotter and harder,  
History meandering out of sight, unheeding of mortal limits and needs  
down, down I walk to the baked tectonic floor,  
where Truth stretches in all directions  
    as far as the eyes can see.

It is here at the bottom that  
Evolution lurks,  
playing its waiting game,  
weaving and reworking its subtle tapestries

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<sup>1</sup> The Scottish naturalist James Hutton (1726-1797) is known as the "father of geology" because of his formulation of geological principles based on his observations of stratified layers of rocks. He recognized the strata had been formed by natural processes of sedimentation and erosion over long stretches of time (which Hutton called "deep time"). However the Christian view still predominated, which held that the world began in 4000 BC and all rocks had formed during the Great Flood. Hutton's findings were a direct scientific challenge to this religious orthodoxy, and would later inspire another iconoclast: Charles Darwin.

to which we, upon placing index to forehead,  
smile and give names.

Here at the bottom, forgotten mythologies  
whisper among the reeds, rattling dried stalks  
that blow away,  
never again to be seen.

“It has ever been so,” say the rocks,  
“It has ever been so,  
for as long as we can remember...”

And here at the bottom are the frail signs  
of a time so long ago,  
when a lush green earth drained  
ancient inland seas  
in a story we shall never really know.  
Ammonites? Trilobites? Could they talk?  
On Friday nights, did they sing?  
Oh, to know the moment when  
amphibious ancestors first crawled,  
up out of their watery hole to  
nest on firmer landing.

And what were their reasons, what were their reasons?  
They must have been ones of advantage.

Or the time when Australopithecines  
dared to stand straight and tall,  
freed their hands for dexterous use  
and began to roll the world into a ball.  
Founders of ungovernable governance,  
inventors of the means and reasons to destroy,  
and to build and write, invent and design  
litigate, fixate, disrupt and hoard,  
the currencies that hide their final consequences,  
the entropy that ensures the red shift of nations:

What were their reasons, what were their reasons...?  
Were they really ones of advantage?

How the trumpets must have blared  
loud and clear  
to mark those occasions, saying:  
“This is it, my dears, this is it,

The moment we have all awaited.  
Pay close attention or you shall miss it!”

And I believe those trumpets still play  
today, their soulful cadence ringing,  
signaling the end  
and the beginning,  
but it is very hard to hear above the noise.

And the boundless canyonlands!  
Chasms and crevices, coulees and cracks  
pages on which deep time was scrawled,  
in sparkling schist Precambrian graffiti  
lies etched on ancient cavernous walls.  
Traverse the left shoot,  
observe its crystalline, pegmatitic veins,  
glean the primeval tale of ancient arkosic and arenaceous  
sandstone strata:  
oxidized reds and former riverbeds,  
fossilized flora and fauna, long dead:  
microscopic albuminous grains remain  
from a primordial soup now drained and desiccated.

Yes, traverse those awesome chasms:  
from one gorge offshoots another, and from this,  
four others, and from those four,  
eight more—  
all this and so much more—  
how can mere words convey to you even a shadow of what I mean?  
Who can draw back the curtain on  
this clanking collection of colored microdots,  
all 360 degrees that would come  
unglued and fly apart  
if our resolve would allow it?

Isn't this...the meaning...of mortal beings?

I have faced the fearsome vastness of these  
canyonlands before;  
felt the scorching, searing heat that wrings  
the water from my pores;  
I have crept to the edge, squinted and strained  
to resolve the perplexing bits and strands;  
'til I must explode into particles more basic

if I am to understand.

What is...?

What was...?

What can be...?

What will be...?

What will be???.....What will be???

“God only knows,” they shrug and say.

“Have you dried the dishes, and put the silverware away?”

That is not much of a bone to chew, I muse  
but for many it seems to keep the dogs at bay.

And so passes another day.

*Pick chop Chop pick*

*Chip chip chip*

*Chip chop*

## Road to Nowhere

Where does that road go?

Cuts through the dry valley and over the top,  
peak after peak jags away

from my 30,000 foot high spot.

The thin line zags, like a seismic crack,  
winding through the wilderness

of red mesas and buttes,

meandering oxbows and gullied arroyos,  
a vastness where a thirst for hope could get lost.

Landscape whispering in ancient tongues,  
pulsing in E flat, 47 octaves below middle C,

the lowest hum of the revolving earth

barely detectable from my flyover perch,

whispers the unspeakable of lost tales,  
of human dust and bone shard artifacts,

come and gone and

gone gone like a stutter in the dry wind.

Dust devils swirling above a fault line that opens

and swallows a thousand lifetimes of diligence,

leaving no trace but the unsettling vibrato

of silence.

Yet still to somewhere that black crack goes!  
My eyes follow it toward oblivion, but wait --  
Is that a house -- tucked into the valley fold?  
    A small bump of civilization poking up  
        from the terrain's climb?  
What kind of human would live so far from anywhere,  
surrounded by the chocolate dust and layers  
    of geologic years and fossilized nowheres?

But no, no. Not a house at all.  
    Just another wrinkle in that vast corrugated land.

To where does that road to nowhere go?

## The Loan

It comes back to me in pieces, in  
reflective bites over breakfast cereal—  
the smile of moonlit miles,  
walks under freckles of stars  
two bodies, folded in a hammock,  
childish words for you, carved in a tree  
so close, the summer grass as we  
crawled. And we rubbed, I and thou,  
cheek to cheek,  
hair to hair,  
cheek hairs brushed by dew,  
drizzle like feather clouds  
like memories of my baby blanket,  
star-crossed patterns peering  
    at each other through our  
windows—  
what marvelous shelters,  
you and I,  
what a lighthouse,  
what a beacon glowed within you and  
beamed out at me  
through your windows.

And then—suddenly—it was all gone. Poof!  
This life is on loan, it turns out.  
What we thought was ours belongs somewhere else,

drifted back home  
leaving a pile of bones and  
scattered remains, ashes, chalky petroglyphs  
shards of pottery  
and a long trail of relations like ribbons  
to carry on with what they too have borrowed.

Dandelion's time had come to leave upon the  
wind, not returning when spring  
pushed up through the soil again.  
We thought we would all live on the same block forever,  
a shady cul-de-sac with  
a box elder swaying over the creek,  
the water feigning timelessness,  
tree rings to infinity.  
But a storm got the elder, the years dried the creek,  
your kiss became a memory  
our conversation a hushed prayer,  
the doctor's words a trace  
whispering through the moonlit lace, the last  
light I saw reflected in your graying eyes  
showed the telephone disconnected,  
the boisterous neighborhood grown silent  
bat and ball, lifeless in the on-deck  
a field no longer sown,  
the grandfather clock chiming  
over a hearth gone cold.

Everything in its own way announces the final curtain,  
we trowel a foundation,  
mark ourselves with a lifetime of endeavor  
and then we are called to relinquish the monument;

no, it relinquishes us

Dull chatter in the background, announcing itself at the door,  
with a rap and a rude harrumph,  
waistcoat fastidious on the coach driver,  
ah yes, the coach awaits, the door creaks open,  
passage for one.

It's a marathon and then  
nothing,  
silhouette instead of stone,

the universal groan,  
pace yourself, passage for one,  
you won't be takin' it with you,  
this life is on loan.

## Valley of the Flower (for the Covid dead)

Between the horror and the horror  
lies the valley of the flower,  
purple and orange sprinkle the landscape with hope,  
fresh green sprigs poke through  
the snow crust melting,  
winter-cracked faces seek the warmth of climbing sun.

We huddled in our tents, while the blizzard piled high  
hungry eyes fearing, the dwindling of our rations.  
Suffering the casualties between mistrust and panic  
our wavering humanity, prayed for our salvation.

At first bonded, by the gene of solidarity,  
we held firm hands, and swore unanimity,  
but hunger scratches from the inside-out,  
shows no mercy to pleas or prayers,  
poverty of plenty laughed most bitterly,  
the desperation in our eyes screamed  
what we refused to say:

how could one's soul survive the coming atrocity?

Soon our haven became our depraved prison, so  
on the 30<sup>th</sup> day many of us fled.  
Gaunt and desperate, rationality eaten,  
left the horror of the Unknown for  
the terror of the Unknowable.  
Stumbling on brute instinct up the snow-choked trails,  
clawing across the tundra between two jagged peaks,  
menacing giants jutting sharply like teeth,  
we scavenged across the whiteout wilderness.

Civilization collapsed as the Animal returned,  
howling at the moon, yellow fangs bared,  
shadows hissing in thrums of a heartbeat



eyes fixated on the necks of the ones in front.  
Slogging blindly through the driving sleet  
rags wrapped around, blackened frostbit feet,  
we longed for when last we basked  
under the warmth of the golden sun-fall:

*The flaxen fields had supplied the summer harvest  
The world had been new in each other's arms  
the family of humanity fed by a cornucopia  
scales of justice weighed the balance of the light;  
wisdom of elders translated the guiding stars  
a gentle compact held the Demon-hounds at bay  
peace between the tribes fed by shared prosperity  
ecumenical faith in the rainbow of the light.*

But now the frigid Mask of Death  
was chasing and stalking our darkened souls,  
prisoners of our internal struggle  
to put one frozen foot in front of the other.  
Each disappearance under the cover of night  
became a snow-buried mound by the grey morning light,  
survivors awaited the next date with the grave, guilty of  
human practices of survival,  
red claw Nature, brawling for hegemony,  
mercy froze inside the tears of our deprivation.

Yet silence greeted our prayers to God:  
“Merciful One, why have you forsaken us,  
left us alone to face this muted roar,”  
chased by the inhumanity of our sapien fears,  
each panicked moment facing the final door.

Finally at the edge of earth and sky,  
between the craggy peaks where an indifferent God slept,  
where our courage cowered, scarred with awe  
where the struggle was waged, most terrible and raw,  
as the last of the last of us stumbled through the grey,  
searching for green poking through the snowy graves,  
moment after moment hung  
with only phantoms in sight --  
finally, there it was, in the breaking of the light --

the lone petal pushing up through the snow crystal.

Barely visible, a glint of orange,  
steadfast and alive,  
and then another, and then purple,  
trail of green tips, beckoning the deprived.  
Hope replaced the hunger of the primal,  
sunlight brilliant off its snowy white wings,  
stumbling forward, from flower to warm flower,  
orange to purple amidst the sun-fall shower.  
How quickly had collapsed our democratic covenant,  
sculpted over centuries, melted away in days,  
scientists will search for the remains of our route,  
an apostles' dozen went in, only a handful came out.

We have passed this way before,  
the Devil always dancing for a chance to resurrect,  
hostage to the brutish craving, to eat lest you be eaten,

while God never answered our prayer,  
so we gave thanks to the sun  
which does not care.

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Steven Hill is a principal and contributing writer for *Caveat Lector*. He is also a journalist and the author of seven books of political non-fiction. His essays, articles and media interviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, PBS, BBC, C-SPAN, Democracy Now, and many others. He is the chief editor and contributor to the online publication [DemocracySOS](http://www.DemocracySOS.com). He has published short fiction and poems in a number of journals, including the *Columbia Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Synchronized Chaos*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Struggle*, *Prophetic Voices*, and the anthologies *Sparkle and Blink*, *Grasp the Rainbow* and *Poets for a Livable Planet*. His plays have been produced in New York City (Off Off Broadway), Washington DC and San Francisco. His website can be found at <http://www.Steven-Hill.com>.