

First Fifth

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January 29 — March 5, 2022

ON SEEING *FIRST FIFTH*

First there was nothing. And in that space of nothingness, heat accumulated, rose to unimaginable blazing heights, until the very nothingness was ripped apart by that great letting off of steam we have labeled the Big Bang. And low and behold, nothingness now had tenants. First, by sub-particles, which soon—in a universe without the yardstick of life, everything happens sooner rather than later—imploded into protons and electrons. They intermarried and gave birth to Helium and Hydrogen, which in turn intertwined and rearranged themselves to form element after element. And so, the fabric of somethingness came to be woven.

Great savants have posited that the universe itself is a living thing. Its expanding drive outward into the unharvested void, its birthing of new galaxies, the mad games it plays with molecules, capped off with the certainty of an expiry date, the same coming to an end to which all living things must reconcile themselves. Even the universe's prodigious kickoff, how it hums with familiarity. For in the soft darkness of our mothers' wombs, it is a reenactment, in scale. Zygote and Embryo warily shake hands—and are transfigured, eventually springing forth in a lump of bones and flesh, which in the history of the cosmos has never existed before and will never come again.

You are a universe. And as you grow, so does your ability to control the galaxies that form within you—your memories. The building blocks of life. We cling to them, grapple with them. We fashion them into shards or jewels, and they in turn shape who we are. How well we disguise it, with our placid, law-abiding exterior, while our minds strive to film and record and journal every last split-second of our existence. All of us suffer, silently and secretly, from a clerk's wish to archive the life once lived, the childhood of wonders, the raw youth, the best of our days.

We record the sound of our dog's crisp bark when, having been away for a spell, we walk through the door; film ourselves as we dance with our cousins, for once caring little for how gangly our moves are, our laughter chiming through the house as a holiday dinner is readied; in diaries, we write about the time when we were stood up,

let off, casted out, taken in, looked over, leaned on, passed by. The universe began with minutia, you yourself as a cluster of little cells, and likewise, our obsessive gallery of details, which for convenience's sake, we call our memory, and perhaps our life.

One day, you come to realize that the glory of the universe is nothing but matter, and by extension, you are nothing but matter upon matter. 'What matters?' you whimper. What is to become of us, as the first shovelful of soil cascades down and our soul is sucked back into vacuum? In the subsequent century, a converted MP4 of our sixteenth birthday party is being scrutinized by a great-great-grandnephew for indicators that they are not the first person to ever feel confused and frightened by this existential parlor trick.

What consolations are left to us? Look around you. Even when winter suffocates nature to death, spring resurrects her. Somewhere out there, someone smiles over our clumsy attempt at friendliness; a rival appreciates our standing up for them even when we had everything to lose; a former lover comes across an old sweater that still carries our scent; we are that small but influential detail. Life is a latticework of souls building galaxies for other souls. After all, half the stars in the sky are long dead, but we continue to gaze upon their beauty light years later, and the glorious rings of Saturn upon which scholars marvel, exist only because they have an arm-lock on what was once part of our Solar System.

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