

The Question

O mother dearest
Provider of all
To those who come
Deftly balancing
For all
Despite of our conflicts
Carelessness and greed

Revolving around father
Who radiates our lives
Your brother's smiley face
Overseeing our nocturnal slumber

O mother, a vision to see
From long life's experience
Pray tell
What is my destiny?

Like so many others
Will I pass
To be replaced
By another?

Alas, petite beauty
Bell of the celestial ball
Your silence speaks
That's up to me.

August 29, 1953

It was late August, the weekend before Labor Day, and during my drive up to see Irma I passed a small park. The sign said it had hiking paths, but I was more interested in the large hill that sat in the middle. Not quite a mountain, it was tall and forested.

After dinner, Irma and I drove back to the park just before nightfall. We studied the map of the park and learned that the not quite mountain was called Buxton's Hill

I told Irma we should be able to find an opening in the canopy somewhere up there. I hoped the crest of the hill would provide an opening to the heavens.

It took twenty five minutes to trudge to the top. We wandered about the knob, scouting for an opening wide enough to do see the broad starlit skies. It was a crystal clear evening and the crispness of late summer evenings seeped through our light jackets. Irma stopped and pointed toward an outcropping of large boulders and said. Look down there. There's a ledge or something sticking out.

I said that will work. I tucked the blanket under my left arm, and took Irma's hand with my right as we worked our way down a steep incline then stepped on to a large boulder jutting out from the hillside. I spread the blanket on the very tip and sat down facing the hillside while Irma gazed at the sky in wonder. I smiled when she said, George, look at all of the stars out tonight.

I know. Sit down and lay back so you get a real view of the celestial show.

Irma laid back beside me and gasped in awe. George I have looked at the stars before but never seen anything like this. It's just unbelievable. How many do you think there are up there?

In town it is really difficult to see the universe because of all of the lights glaring up against the atmosphere. But, out here, there's little light pollution so you get quite a view. I explained. Spectacular isn't it?

But, how many do you think there are, thousands? There was a child like wonder in her tone.

More like billions, perhaps trillions, I said. No one has ever, nor, I suspect, will ever be able to count all of them. Keep in mind we are looking at only one tiny little bit of the sky. Besides there are stars far beyond what we can see.

Look at how many there are in the middle there. Why are there so many all bunched up there? Irma's hand pointed a bit to the East.

You mean the band across the sky that looks almost milky? I said.

Is that the Milky Way? She said in awe.

I told her. That my young scientist is our galaxy, the Milky Way. A big swirling

pinwheel of billions of stars.

Are they moving? I don't see any of them moving.

Oh yeah, they're moving all right. Everything in the universe is always in motion, constantly moving.

Everything? Irma turned and looked at me.

Everything, even though you can't see the movement. Everything is always in constant motion, right down to the electrons, protons, neutrons that make everything up.

She scowled. But George, stones don't move. They're hard and just sit there.

True, I said. But the molecules that make up stone are made up of atoms that have these little tiny electrons whirring around the nucleus all of the time.

Whirring around? Her eye brows scrunched together.

I said, you remember studying the planets and the sun right?

Yeah.

Well atoms are sort of like that. There is a nucleus which would be like the sun and electrons like planets that are always whirring around the nucleus. They are just so tiny we can't see them. Everything about all matter is about atoms and electrons whirring."

Even us?

Even us. Even after we die, the atoms that make up the molecules that form the tissues of our bodies are still whirring away.

Even after they embalm us and put us in a casket?

Even the embalming fluid is made up of atoms that are whirring.

So everything in the universe is whirring? The look on Irma's face was precious.

I guess that sums it up as well as anyone can. We are all sort of one big collection of whirring matter. Think about this though as you stare out into the universe. What if we are the only planet in all the universe that has creatures on it that understand this whirring stuff? Imagine that of all of the billions or trillions of stars, some that have planets, earth might be the only place in the universe that has living, breathing creatures who know all about the whirring stuff. We laid quietly, Irma digesting the magnitude of the question.

Irma rolled to her side propping her head up on her palm and asked if it could be that we are the only planet with life?

Hard to say. I said. It is likely we will never know. I told her, here we lay, two pedestrians by any measure, looking out at the universe, mesmerized by its vastness, in awe of its scope, pondering whether or not we may be the only planet in all of the universe where someone can do this.

Irma put a hand on my chest and asked, do you think we are, George?

I hope not, but wonder about it. I said.

Why do you wonder about it? Irma said

I told her I worry, that we as humans, the highest order of intelligent beings on the planet do not appreciate our situation. Mankind in general seems to have no comprehension of our uniqueness in the universe. We don't seem to look at the beauty of earth and understand that there may be no other place in the universe with life on it as we know it.

But why do you worry about it? She said. It's an interesting question.

I looked over at Irma and explained my thoughts. The earth is all we have to sustain life. What if we screw it up, or do something crazy like unleash a catastrophic nuclear war and burn the entire planet up? There wouldn't be anybody to write about it, nobody would know about all we'd achieved, and nobody in the universe that would care. We are it, and yet, nations fight with nations, people kill one another, there are periods of genocide, and we have weapons that can wipe out entire nations. All this occurs as if no one lies down on a stony ledge, looks up at the stars and considers the possibility that we are it. Life is precious, the world around us is precious, and it may be that in all the universe, Earth is precious. It is ours, mankind's, to care for.

She wondered, "Don't you think people understand this?"

I suspect there are a few," I said, "but only a few. And that's the sad part.

What will become of earth if we kill ourselves off.

I surmised that like the dinosaurs before us, some new creature will dominate the earth, but posed the question of whether they will be able to appreciate listening to Tchiachovski or Mozart, will they paint a Starry Night or Mona Lisa, will they sculpt a Venus Demilo or build great pyramids, or do you suppose these new conquerors of earth will lay on a stony ledge and peer up to the heavens and wonder?

Irma snuggled closer and laid her head on my shoulder and looked to the heavens and said, Only God knows.

I kissed her cheek and said, let's hope he's there.