

Note Left on a Mountain

David Axelrod

On June 23, 2003, the BBC reported “‘Birth cry’ of the cosmos heard.” Mark Whittle, a professor of astronomy at the University of Virginia, appears in a photograph at the head of the article, with a spoon in his right hand and an empty wine glass in his left to illustrate, somewhat oddly, the discovery and recording of this “birth cry.” Whittle we learn “analyzed the so-called background radiation that was born 400,000 years after the Big Bang.” Whittle explains that the “ripples in the radiation” resemble sound waves 30,000 light-years wide and fifty-five octaves below the threshold of human hearing. Whittle “shifted” these inaudible sound waves to the audible range of human hearing to create two sound recordings we may listen to on the Internet. The first sound renders the initial million years of the expanding universe as five seconds of what it is hard to say precisely, though it is surely fascinating. Noise, yes, but despite being noise, it manages somehow to please. The second sound, somewhat longer, compresses the sound of the first 400,000 years, a sound, the article explains, that “changes from a bright major chord to a somber minor one.”

That’s no literary fancy. Listening to it reminded me of the first piece of classical music I was in any way consciously aware of—Beethoven’s 7th Symphony, the second movement in particular, the Allegretto. After reading about this cosmological birth cry, I listened to the symphony all the way through twice, then listened a third time to the Allegretto, whose “pale key of A minor,” suggests a worldly reality far more difficult and troubling than the joyful Vivace of the first movement, once referred to as the “apotheosis of dance.” As the Allegretto begins, its melancholy strings seem to recognize our fate, possibly all fates, as uniformly serious and grave. Thinking again of Whittle’s discovery in his second rendering of creation, it is as if God recognized too late a flaw in His universal design.

Listening to those universal soundscapes and to Beethoven’s 7th Symphony, I realized how despite the pleasure of their novelty, the brevity of Whittle’s recordings disappoints. Who wouldn’t wish for those cosmic recordings to continue? Who but for those in despair wouldn’t wish for this brief but novel life to linger a little longer? Besides the fact that neither of Whittle’s recordings is particularly beautiful, those inconceivably distant chords provoke an odd comfort—an ambient tone, the background radiation, if you will, of the universal mother’s pulse heard inside the cosmological womb.

Ask someone, Do you recall your birth? and you will be regarded strangely. So ask again: No, really, do you remember?

Someone I asked this question once claimed she had no memories at all prior to turning eighteen and leaving home, a claim so preposterous, I ceased all contact with her at that instant. A childhood friend, Moritz, once claimed that he recalled a dream he associated with being ill, his first high fever. Before the fever broke, he was aware of himself trapped in an amber-lit room whose walls were like a membrane collapsing around him. He felt awkward as a giant in a world built for the Lilliputian, and the tiny scale of things felt suffocating, requiring him to stoop, fold himself in half as the ceilings lowered around his head and shoulders.

“A terrifying dream,” he said. “And no apparent way out of that room.” He told me that he heard a sound, deep-toned and distant, throbbing through the walls. A sound so familiar and pleasant that he felt even more conflicted about his panicked need to exit the shrinking room. He wished to remain in the presence of the sound, but to have lingered any longer would have caused him to pass out. Then the fever broke, and the dream ended; Moritz woke in his bed alone, covered in sweat, the only other sounds being the voices of his mother and sister going on about their daily lives elsewhere in the house, and a crow cawing from a bare maple outside his window.

The sound of the mother’s heart, obviously, is not the sound of the universe. Not exactly. And yet, the intensity with which Moritz recalled the intimacy of his mother’s body and his own desire to live was unsettling, especially in light of subsequent discoveries.

His memory of a time before his own consciousness of time reminded me of another conversation we had, in which he explained Leopardi’s argument concerning the resonant depths of collective memory, the “beauty and pleasure” of that memory accumulating inside of words. Such memories, Moritz explained, as are perhaps aroused whenever we use a common name for a plant or animal. Arthur Sze’s list of endangered or extinct species in “The String Diamond,” is a poignant example of Leopardi’s (and Moritz’s) claim: “Deltoid spurge, / red wolf, / ocelot, / green-blossom pearly mussel, /... / scrub plum, / bluemask darter, / crested honeycreeper, / rough-leaved loosestrife.” Even in the eternal absence of extinction, the memory of the living thing’s “beauty and pleasure” lives on in the uttered name. In the Dominion of the Dead, Robert Pogue Harrison summarizes Leopardi’s argument: “the worlds our words once inhabited re-inhabit in turn the words that outlive them.” And so we listen hopefully for the song of origins we recall being sung to us inside both the mother’s, as well as the cosmological, womb.

In Moritz’s case, however, it was more complicated. His miraculous memory of birth in no way lessened the burden of what we understood was his family’s recent history and the cause of his depression. Though he was born in the United States, in 1958, the silence his German parents maintained about the past, specifically the wordless world of that catastrophically violent period prior to their emigration, inhabited and disturbed every aspect of his life and rendered futile any effort to rescue him from despair.

Something I jotted down in a journal, not long before Moritz disappeared from all but memory and words, took me an hour to find in a box in a storage unit. After another hour-long search of the box, the journal lay open on the table. Exactly 20 years before the publication of “‘Birth cry’ of the cosmos heard,” that is, on June 23, 1983, my seven-week-old child asleep in the bed beside me on Bear Creek in Montana, I woke to a sound of distant, low-pitched humming. I lay there in wonder. That very deep-toned sound emanated from the earth itself and enveloped the earth like an aural atmosphere, the air alive with its vibration. That sound I could feel as well as hear lasted perhaps no more than a few seconds in the borderlands of sleep, though its presence filled 10,000 years. I put my sleeping child back in his cradle and went to the kitchen and wrote the following, noting the time, 5:15 a.m.:

In the first light, the roar of God, then the singing of small birds. I could hear it coming down from across the fields. I caught a chill, but decided to get up anyway and see what was outside. It seemed familiar, that sound toward which we are drawn for comfort, as to the sound of our own heart resounding in the pillow as we fall asleep, an echo of the sound of our mother’s heart all around us before we are born. One heart beating within another within another.

I walked out along the lane, under a canopy of aspens, and gazed over the hayfields, at that moment full of daisies, and I distinctly remember thinking that I could see the sound I heard, like an animation of radio signals transmitted not from a steel tower, but from the Sapphire Mountains, in whose foothills I stood.

At 10:30 a.m., after walking down the road to retrieve the morning newspaper, I added: “Opened the Missoulian to the peaceful faces of three decapitated Salvadorans.”



David Axelrod is the author of six collections of poems. The most recent, *Folly, and What Next, Old Knife?* published by Lost Horse Press. His previous collection, *The Cartographer’s Melancholy*, won the Spokane Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the 2006 Oregon Book Award. His collection of cultural and environmental essays about the interior Northwest, *Troubled Intimacies*, appeared in 2004. His poems and essays have been published in *New Letters*, *Boulevard*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *High Desert Journal*, *Kenyon Review*, *Quarterly West*, *River Styx*, *Serving House Journal*, *Terrain*, *Verse Daily*, among others. He co-directs the low residency MFA at EOU and edits *basalt magazine*.

Later, in the afternoon, my wife and I, infant son in tow, searched for Moritz, who had abandoned his apartment and belongings in Missoula. We discovered his whereabouts when we caught a glimpse of what we thought was his car on the county road below a bridge on I-90. We exited the highway and followed him to a room in a motel in East Missoula. He refused at first to answer the door. We pleaded. Finally he threw the deadbolt, opened the door, and agreed to come with us.

An hour after this, Moritz had set up residence in a pup tent outside of our cabin.

Before we went to sleep that evening, I recorded this final entry for June 23, 1983: “Uncle Hans passed away tonight. The first loss of this sort since the death of my father, 21 years ago. It’s sad to realize that given how old the aunts and uncles are this is the first in a long series of losses to follow.”

Subsequently, I forgot the broad sweep of that day and its melancholy intimacies, but never the sound I heard that morning.

After a close call with my own death in my mid-30s, I made the acquaintance of Richard McFarland, who lived alone without phone or electricity far down the Imnaha River. I had earlier expressed to a friend my desire to meet people who abandoned the lives they created to return to the lost landscapes of childhoods. Soon, I heard about Richard from a friend of my friend who supplied his “address” in that remote canyon. It is a striking landscape, the one he was hoping to reclaim. Canyon walls of ochre-colored columnar basalt are interspersed with broad grassy benches that rise thousands of feet above the canyon floor, where a primitive road winds above the river. From that rough road, the broad western sky narrows to a channel of blue, mirroring the river below. Depending on the season, the road is either rutted, muddy, or dusty as it divides into various trails leading to backcountry ranches and camps.

Having never before traveled into the area, I arranged through a series of letters that passed back and forth over several months to meet Richard at the mouth of Lightning Creek. At the appointed time, he stood waiting, leaning against his flatbed truck and taking a contemplative pause to smoke a pipe of tobacco. When he saw me across the twilight, he leaned forward and shoved his tall, thin frame away from the front fender of his truck. He gestured to follow along a dirt track that led through galleries of cottonwoods along Lightning Creek. The wide metal edge of flatbed that served as a bumper was plastered by stickers of decidedly liberal causes, everything from support for gay rights to paid maternity leave, an unusually iconoclastic set of political beliefs for that isolated area of northeastern Oregon. According to the USGS map I consulted earlier, the trail to his cabin wound five miles, crossing several fords that I soon discovered required a degree of heroics on the part of my little truck, over whose hood the current washed. The river cobbles slipped away beneath the tires, and I thought for sure that the truck would founder, the headlights glowing vaguely under green water. Meanwhile, lightning flashed overhead and thunder exploded with such concussive force it gave substance to the air, its echo repeating for miles. Then, in the silence before the next lightning strike, came the sound of rocks skating down basalt cliffs in the nearby dark.

I pitched my tent far from the canyon walls across the meadow near the creek and joined Richard on the porch of the cabin, where we shared a flask as the rain poured then abruptly stopped, leaving just the sound of water dripping from leaves and the ambient song of the creek. When I asked why he had returned, Richard said his return to the landscape of childhood 70 years ago was prompted, “By worrisome little messages. Warnings.”

I didn’t know what he meant.

“Sometimes we get a little too serious for our own good,” he said. “What you discover when you return to your place of origin,” he said, “if there is anything, such as an intact place to return to, you figure out pretty quickly that—” And here he trailed off without finishing his thought.

The singular fact about Lightning Creek is that there are no people. There’s little evidence of occupation besides sporadic arrivals and departures: cattle drives in spring and fall, a few wanderers appearing on three-day holiday weekends in summer, fewer and fewer hunters as the season turns toward winter and the country above shuts down. Seventy years on, the intimacies of his childhood—the open-endedness of time, his parents and their friends following herds and harvests—all that seemed permanent then appeared scarce now.

What we imagine we will find, we fail to find, but that is not the same as saying it does not exist. The Dutch writer, Cees Nootboem, observed, “what vanished is still there as something that vanished.” And that was largely borne out by Richard’s experience.

The next morning, under strikingly calm, clear skies, he and I stood in the glistening meadow beside Lightning Creek. We lit a fire in a ring of stones and boiled water for tea.

Following his service in the Navy during the Korean War, Richard finished college, then lived aimlessly until, during the Kennedy Administration, he joined the Peace Corps. After several years in Africa, he “pursued a career”—a vagueness that seemed intended as a judgment of the pursuit. He retired at the first opportunity, and then, his blood cells presenting some abnormalities, he hired on as a ranch hand in Lightning Creek, where his own parents had worked as hired hands when they were young. He was born nearby in 1926. He told me that he would probably die in the cabin behind us.

The Imnaha Canyon is one of those few places that remains more or less today as it was a lifetime ago. The paved road, electricity, and phone did not arrive anywhere in that canyon until well into the second half of the twentieth century, and had still not arrived at Richard’s cabin. That canyon was among the last places in the contiguous United States to enter the modern era, as we commonly think of it—the age of displacement, rootlessness, and loss. As such, there is still a recognizable place to return to there in that canyon, a past seen, albeit through a liminal scrim.

Over black tea, Richard asked if I noticed the tall ponderosa on the hillside at the canyon’s mouth? “It’s the tree Chief Joseph used to orient his retreat from General Howard. They began their war here. That tree marked the way across a low point in the ridge to Dug Bar. That’s where he got his people across the river holding onto the manes of their horses as they swam. I imagine it was a somber crossing. They were leaving this country and must have wondered if they would ever see it again.”

After a long pause, Richard looked up, a little surprised at his emotion. He laughed, and pointed out that when Howard arrived, it took him three days to move his army across the same place in the river. “I think that tree is really not the original, though everyone wishes it were. And it could be, I suppose.”

We sat in silence again for several more minutes while an azure bunting sang near the creek. Otherwise, the morning remained still. When he spoke again, he was still thinking about the Nez Perce retreat from eastern Oregon to Bear Paw, Montana. “So much happened after Joseph crossed that river. A lot of it sorrowful. You can’t discount any of it. I mean, it didn’t happen during my life, and the Nez Perce moved on well before my own parents came into this canyon. But it’s never really over. The same is true about the camp of Chinese miners above Dug Bar, murdered for gold. That one seems a little more connected to the world I grew up in. When I was a kid, I knew who the murderers were. I’d see them in the summer up at the Grange. But either way, what happened here doesn’t go away, and no matter how isolated this place seems, it played its role.”

He went on to say that he had come to prefer the idea that the pine tree is not the same tree because people are too often motivated by a longing to keep things the same. “History inhabits us, even if we pretend we don’t bear its burden. In this canyon that particular horizon is very narrow. The burden is always here. And that hasn’t made it easy to come back.”

If the big tree at the mouth of the canyon was the tree Joseph used to orient his strategic retreat from the finale of Manifest Destiny, you might be able to more easily ignore the fact that Joseph’s body is buried beside a littered highway in Washington State far from his father’s grave and his own Wallowa homeland. The tree’s continued existence would seem a form of inviolate presence, the past persisting without the moral complications of exile. Richard sipped from his cup and I was not interested really in pointing any of this out. Joseph was born just over the ridge to the north. He wasn’t as lucky as Richard. He and those who followed him from this canyon and across a series of battlefields in Idaho and Montana bore the real burden of history.

We looked up at the gap on the rim of the canyon. His mother had gone to Enterprise months before Richard’s birth. Soon after, his father, on horseback, carried him into the canyon in his arms, an infant passing into this life through that low point on the ridge.

“Spain Saddle,” he said. “We came down bench after bench of deep grass into a side-canyon of the Imnaha, forded the river, and then made our way back up here, where everyone was waiting to greet me and my mother on her return. All those people who lived here then are gone. I’m the only one left now.”

A shadow crossed his face like a bird passing between him and the sun. He teared up, and apologized. “I don’t think I can say any more about any of this now. I’m sorry. Coming back here at this point in my life has been a little overwhelming. The day-to-day here is very simple, but I don’t feel that way. It’s not as simple as a routine.” He poked the fire and then stared at the canyon walls directly above where we stood. His dilemma was clear and not so hopeful as Nootboem suggests. The strong emotions he felt were greater than his capacity to express them in words. “I’m here and can see it,” he said referring to the community that occupied the canyon of his youth. “And yet I can see it’s all gone, except, of course inside of me.” Simply re-inhabiting the canyon in no way guaranteed the past that was dear to him could reveal itself, much less endure beyond his life and into the lives and words of others.

Cartographers dispute whether Matterhorn Peak at 9,845 feet is the highest peak in the Eagle Cap Wilderness. Older maps indicate that Sacajewea Peak, just to the north of the Matterhorn, across a narrow, one mile traverse, is a few feet higher. The two names, the two peaks, are emblems of the freakishness of American memory, and each fatal in its way: the memorializing of indigenous claims now in exile; the mistaken notion that northeastern Oregon was only a reflection of a former world.

During my first ascent of the Matterhorn, I was less concerned with elevations than the distance of my one-day, 20-mile round-trip. At the time I attempted that initial climb, the length and duration of the ordeal was expressive of some kind of youthful virtue. The "narrow, sandy ledges," however, that a far more experienced climber had described as an indication that the summit was in sight, seemed horribly exposed and soon enough caused me to abandon any vanity about virtuous ordeals.

The peak, it turned out, is more of a gently rounded ridge than the image suggested by the mountain's famous Swiss namesake. From the east, the Matterhorn rises from Ice Lake into a mile-long, and moderately steep wall. You would never mistake the Wallowa Matterhorn for the iconic Matterhorn above Zermatt. Still, the west face rising from Hurricane Creek is a five thousand foot vertical wall of poorly metamorphosed limestone, and even to climb from the east to peer over the west face from the summit into that abyss, one climbs with the awareness of the heroics of a Whympers on a barren crag. The climb so unnerved me, despite the appearance of the sandy ledges that simplified the final ascent, and despite the broad, gentle aspect of the mountaintop, I almost resigned from the climb just a few feet shy of the summit.

This is a pattern of behavior characteristic of my admittedly modest experience as a mountaineer. Even today, after years of climbing with experienced rock and ice climbers whose cooing confidence has coaxed me up rock faces and over crags that seemed unclimbable, much less easy, I still lose nerve. There is a crucial transitional moment while ascending when it seems that one is ascending into air only, that the earth has given way above, and one must climb, as it were, blindly into the void. Gravity seems to weaken. Timidly looking behind me, that is, down, I find myself stymied by the appearance of there existing nothing much above or below, only the immediate fact of the rock to which I cling. I lose my ability to focus my mind, and vertigo spirals through me like a worm.

At such moments of crisis, a lecture erupts inside my head on what we might call the natural history of human will. So as not to second-guess, as on that August day climbing the Matterhorn for the first time, I forced myself to make one more inevitably simple but cautious move along the rock face, and found myself standing on top of the mountain. That others virtually walk the same route is something to discuss another day.

Of that day almost 20 years ago, there appears only this brief entry in my journal: "Climbed Matterhorn today," and then, aside, and a little cryptically, "—the note left on the mountain." Of the first part of that fragmentary entry there is little to dispute. I climbed the mountain (admittedly not bravely) and recorded the fact in both my journal and in the shiny metal box the climbing club, the Mazamas, placed on the mountaintop.

Inside that box were messages, accumulated over a number of years, from climbers who had preceded me. One often finds in mountain records prose that is as predictable as the sunny summer days that inspired the words. Sealed jars or ammo boxes stuffed full of sentiments that express an anodyne Christianity, the pagan splendors of the so-called "natural world," dharmic bum I'm-living-in-the-moment bliss, and the you'd-have-to-be-one-to-understand the writer's Übermensch penetration of reality. All express an equal belief in their accomplished virtue.

But I know, too, or have convinced myself I know, that the note referred to in my journal was written by someone other than myself. On October 7, 1998, I tried to reconstruct the note, written by a recent retiree, that I failed to record verbatim on August 30, 1995:

I was born here but moved away when I turned 12, and have lived the remainder of my life—another 50 years—at a great distance from these mountains. And now, near the end, I've come back to climb—while I can still climb—into the heart of the country I could not locate, even in memory. I'm happy, having found at last what eluded me all my life.

The false notes in this reconstruction are many and obvious. No one would have left such a note on the mountain. The intensifier "great" seems especially egregious. The two asides set off by dashes, too, are an effort to describe what was perhaps only implied in the actual note. Worse yet, the phrase, "the heart of the country," is an obvious literary ornament borrowed from William Gass. The verb "locate" has more than a whiff of academic jargon and therefore disingenuousness. There was a note, however, left on that mountain, and that note, not my version of it, must have seemed genuine, and powerfully so, as it expressed the dilemma of not having entirely lived one's life as one might have chosen to live it—those past losses continuing to inflect the present.

Other references to this note occur on eight different dates between the second of December 1998 and the twelfth of December 2001, by which time it had become a full-blown melodrama:

She gave my brother life and died in spring, when a small band of Nez Perce still returned to dig camas in the swales of my father's meadow—the mirage of abundance. The year I turned 12, we moved farther west and I have lived a lifetime at a great distance from these mountains, doing work I despise among people I cannot love or leave. I have come back only to climb for this one day, while I can still climb to the core of what memory concocted, possibly a cruel device, this landscape I partly invented: ribbons of glittering snowmelt, forested canyons, knife-edged ridges of marble, seven glacial lakes milky with silt and ice, a dome of careless sky. This singular, dizzying pleasure: vertigo whirling from groin to brain. And now, to have lived long enough to stand here at last, almost worthy of the penalty of being born.

Obviously, things have gotten out of hand. Whatever the actual note on the mountain said is completely obscured in clouds of mythopoesis, evidence of my failure to imagine the actual circumstances of another man's life, his birth cry of the universe substituted for by a fantasy. Whoever that older man was who wrote the original note on the mountain, the message had been lost. He seems vague and inaccessible now, slipping back through borderlands of what memory concocted. And yes, perhaps that is a cruel device.

Since that morning in 1995, I've climbed the Matterhorn no fewer than a half-dozen times, and once or twice without trepidation on the "narrow, sandy ledges." On all subsequent climbs, I've searched the mountaintop for that box the Mazamas placed there, hoping to find the actual note left by the man who lived his life separated from the place that claimed him at birth. Despite being told that the box is there, those searches in the rocks piled on the summit and in protected crevasses proved pointless. Like the birth cry of the universe I heard once, like my suicidal friend Moritz and melancholy Richard's childhood acquaintances, like all the lost worlds we wait to re-inhabit us, the Mazamas box has gone missing.