

## All That's Fit for Letting Go

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I don't take up too many pandemic hobbies but one of my distractions from the many kinds of grieving is reading physics books. I fail to understand them for the most part, the content too dense, the words mostly impenetrable. But I like how small it makes me feel. I don't mind how unsurmountable the sentences are. It reminds me of wandering museums—glass cases of ancient objects, oxidizing pendants, coins, mummies, artifacts looming. My irrelevance in these spaces is a comfortable blanket.

What sticks are the physics books. Not much other than: we are just particles and light. I've always liked that thing about us being stars.

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I'm increasingly addicted to feeling small and inconsequential this year and would be just fine to remain compressed down by this massive, frightening world. I want to nestle down below everything and stare up dumbly. I want no expectations that I'll spring back. That everything will be fine.

I read Frank Wilczek's physics book *A Beautiful Question* and learn about Platonic Solids and the geometric stone spheres of Scotland—five carved stones, probably a dice game, from circa 2000 BCE. Maybe the earliest representations of *the biosphere's simplest creatures, including viruses*.

Hepatitis B is shaped just like these ancient dice. It's more complex than that but this is the extent of how I can boil it down. A virus and an ancient game exist in the same shape. Maybe my pursuit of knowledge is really a desire to know nothing's really new. The world is knitted tightly with overlapping shapes, connections, lines between this and that, repeat, repeat, repeat.

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This is the year to dread holidays. Yet, it must be done for my son.

We sit with my mother in our frozen yard, thumbing mini red and green frosted cupcakes out of a plastic clamshell and slip them under our masks. It's the day before Christmas Eve but it doesn't matter because days have turned into arbitrary things. My mother wears a t-shirt that declares her the *World's Best Nana*. The pastel lettered shirt, she explains, had been a Christmas gift from my father the year before. She wears no coat, just a thin cardigan. Later, when I bring

my mother's lack of coat up to my son's father, he'll say he thought it was intentional. The t-shirt was a way to ensure my father's presence and it couldn't have been seen under a coat. It's a connection I should have been capable of making myself. Something as simple as a shirt.

The next year will be better, I tell myself.

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And then it comes. A new year, no longer the year my father dies or a pandemic is born. There's the possibility of letting go a little, of breathing a little easier. I've always bought into such constructions—the clean slice that comes with the change of a single minute. In with the new.

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Slump faced over the kitchen sink in the shrunken house, NPR tells me it's fine to move a little slower during this dark winter, to not worry so much about the big picture, because unprecedented times warrant self-care. 400,000 are dead but soon it will be 700,000 and then a million and it won't ever stop. The Capital has been literally shit upon.

All this slows me down, but my son's father is acquiring a terrible quirk of charging through the kitchen—forcing his way past the narrow spaces and into corners without an “Excuse me” or a pause so I can accommodate his rapid motion. His too-quick opening of the cabinets, his storming of the sink—it decelerates me all the more.

This is how we fail to be together. Our anxieties manifest in incompatible ways. Him a heavy weight and me an absence in the making.

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In that short stretch where my son naps, I watch the Derek Chauvin trial. There's talk about the last flickers of George Floyd's life, how the oxygen was starved out of him, how the ungridding of his hand at the tire shows the moment it happens. I watch as the court offers me videos from all angles. Carefully parsed out by minutes and seconds. I listen to all explanations of Floyd's autopsy and all explanations of what happens to our bodies when air is denied. I'm a horrible voyeur and it's another way that I'm not who I'm supposed to be.

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While I've become too slow, and my son's father too quick—my son has gotten too large. Giant, really. And no corner of the shrinking house is spared his demands. The giant is wild and naps less and less and my world is all the more troubled for it.

In those midday hours, previously reserved for sleep, I do the only thing I can think to do and release him into the yard. He runs over the grass like a retriever and eventually I try harnessing him in by suggesting birdwatching. Grabbing the binoculars, he insists on looking through them backwards, claims he can see it all.

Because my son is larger and wilder, I'm too focused on his well being. It's here that anxiety creeps in. The more he changes, the more anxious I become. I am consumed by the fragility of life. I stare at the curve of muscle in his long neck and wonder if it's a growth. For two nights in a row, he throws up in his bed. One day he chokes on a cracker. The next week on cereal. These incidents gather and replay in my mind. It's possible this giant, wild child's body is failing. His complexion—paling and a sallow green under the light of the bathroom, where I run the thermometer over his head, hour after hour. When he asks why, I tell him it's a game.

Neck growth, vomit, chokes and sallow skin. My son must have an underlying condition. But his father tells me he is fine. I nod. It's been so long since the child was truly exposed to the world—what could possibly be killing him?

But a thousand pinpricks cover my skin, a buzz hovers just above my sternum, my jaw clenched. I wake up this way, long before the sun, because I can't shake the feeling of inevitable disaster.

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Then comes the summer of fooling ourselves into thinking it was all getting better. The father of my son ceases storming through the kitchen. I spring back some, not so compressed. I return to work full-time and the child goes to summer camp, reunites with friends and teachers he hasn't seen since he was two—a whole building of faces he doesn't remember. For the first few weeks, he comes home with plastic shopping bags of urine-soaked underwear and pants, he comes home flushed, drooping eyes, squirming—thrown into a world and although I can tell he wants the world and he will be good at the world, it begins by wrecking him.

With time I no longer believe he's dying. I learn to breathe easier, bristle less.

I still take his temperature every morning before he leaves the house, though, but it's only because I know the preschool will take it there, before he can be granted permission to enter the big electric blue doors. And if there is a fever, I want to know first. I want the impossible ability of always being out in front.

A month in and my son asks me if I remember playing outside before lunchtime—as we tended to do during our long pandemic days. I do, I say. Of course I do. It's evidence of how moments span a wider distance in his narrow timeframe here. That the past year seems so far away to him confirms to me that it will mostly slip from his mind.

I, on the other hand, am a vast, splayed open universe. Everything sucked in and jumbled up. Nothing seems to be leaving. But I'm surprised at how quickly the nostalgia comes. There's almost the halo of an ache around it. I think about the two cream-colored hawks that would circle the yard before lunch. The child insisting on using the binoculars the wrong way. Pointing them to the sky. Incapable of capturing anything in those two tiny lenses.

One thing I hope won't be lost: Those moments when he would exit the house for the yard and declare, "it's nice and sunny today." It's like he knew how fleeting it all is.