

Orbit 13

In the cosmic calendar of the universe and life, with the Big Bang happening on January 1st, almost fourteen billion years ago, when a supercharged universe-dense speck of energy blew open at the speed of faster-than-light and a thousand trillion degrees Celsius, an explosion that had to create the space it exploded into since there was no space, no something, no nothing, it was near the end of January that the first galaxies were born, almost a whole month and a billion years of atoms moving in cosmic commotion until they began to flock bombshell-bright in furnaces of hydrogen and helium we now call stars, the stars themselves flocking into galaxies until, almost two billion years later on March 16th, one of these galaxies, the Milky Way, was formed, and a six-billion-year summer passed in routine havoc until, at the end of August, a shockwave from a supernova might have caused a slowly rotating solar nebula to collapse - who knows? - but in any case it did collapse and in its condensed centre a star formed that we call our sun, and around it a disc of planets, in some cosmic clumping thumping clashing banging Wild West shoot-out of rock and gas and headlong combat of matter and gravity, and this is August.

Four days later the earth came about, and a day after that its moon. September 14th, four billion years ago (or so some think) came life of sorts, some intrepid little single-celled things that invited themselves into existence in a moment of unthinking and didn't know the holy mess they'd make, and two weeks later on September 30th some of these bacteria learned to absorb infrared and produce sulphates and a month after that the greatest feat of all, to absorb visible light and produce oxygen, our breathable liveable lungable air, though the earth was still lungless for a long time yet, and on December 5th came multicellular life, red, brown and then finally green algae which spawned in boundless fluorescence in the shallows of sunlit water, and on December 20th plants found their way to the land, liverworts and mosses, stemless and rootless but there nonetheless, then hot on their heels only thousands of years later the vascular plants, grasses, ferns, cacti, trees, the earth's unbroken soil now root-snaked and tapped, plundered of moisture soon restocked by the clouds, looping systems of growth and rotting and growth again, competitive barging and elbowing for water and light, for height, for breadth, for greenness and colour.

Christmas Day, though Christ's not yet born - 0.23 billion years ago, and here come the dinosaurs for their five days of glory before the extinction event that wiped them out, or wiped out at least those landlubbing ones, the plodders and runners and tree-munchers, and left in their absence a vacant spot: Wanted - land-dwelling life forms, no time-wasters, apply within, and who should apply but the mammalian things, who quicksharp by mid-afternoon on New Year's Eve had evolved into their most opportunistic and crafty form, the igniters of fire, the hackers in stone, the melters of iron, the ploughers of earth, the worshippers of gods, the tellers of time, the sailors of ships, the wearers of shoes, the traders of grain, the discoverers of lands, the schemers of systems, the weavers of music, the singers of song, the mixers of paint, the binders of books, the crunchers of numbers, the slingers of arrows, the

observers of atoms, the adorners of bodies, the gobblers of pills, the splitters
of hairs, the scratchers of heads, the owners of minds, the losers of minds, the
50 predators of everything, the arguers with death, the lovers of excess, the
excess of love, the addled with love, the deficit of love, the lacking for love,
the longing for love, the love of longing, the two-legged thing, the human
being. Buddha came at six seconds to midnight, half a second later the Hindu
gods, in another half-second came Christ and a second and a half later Allah.
55 In the closing second of the cosmic year there's industrialisation, fascism,
the combustion engine, Augusto Pinochet, Nikola Tesla, Frida Kahlo, Malala
Yousafzai, Alexander Hamilton, Viv Richards, Lucky Luciano, Ada Lovelace,
crowdfunding, the split atom, Pluto, surrealism,
plastic, Einstein,
60 FloJo, Sitting Bull, Beatrix Potter, Indira Gandhi, Niels Bohr, Calamity Jane,
Bob Dylan, Random Access Memory, soccer, pebble-dash, unfriending, the
Russo-Japanese War, Coco Chanel,
antibiotics, the Burj Khalifa, Billie Holiday, Golda Meir, Igor Stravinsky,
pizza,
65 Thermos flasks, the Cuban Missile Crisis,
thirty summer Olympics and twenty-four winter,
Katsushika Hokusai, Bashar Assad, Lady Gaga, Erik Satie, Muhammad Ali,
the deep state, the world wars,
flying,
70 cyberspace, steel, transistors,
Kosovo, teabags, W. B. Yeats,
dark matter, jeans, the stock exchange, the Arab Spring,
Virginia Woolf, Alberto Giacometti,
Usain Bolt, Johnny Cash,
75 birth control,
frozen food,
the sprung mattress,
the Higgs boson,
the moving image,
80 chess.

Except of course the universe doesn't end at the stroke of midnight. Time
moves on with its usual nihilism, mows us all down, jaw-droppingly insensate
to our preference for living. Guns us down. In another split second millennia
will pass and the beings on earth have become exoskeletal-cybernetic-
85 machine-deathless-postbeings who've harnessed the energy of some hapless
star and are guzzling it dry.

If the cosmic calendar is in fact all of time, most of which has not yet
occurred, in another two months any number of things could have happened
to the cool marble of earth and none of them promising from a life point of
90 view - a wandering star could throw the whole solar system out and earth
with it, a meteor strike could cause mass extinction, the earth's axial tilt could
increase, the flexing and drifting of orbits could eventually eject some planets,
and in all events it'll be in roughly another four months, five billion years,
that the sun will run out of fuel, expand to a red dwarf and consume Mercury

95 and Venus. Earth, if it survives, will be scorched and arid, its oceans boiled
dry, a cinder stuck in an interminable orbit of a white dwarf black dwarf
dying sun until the whole show ends as the orbit decays and the sun eats us
up.

100 And this is just the local scene; a minor scuffle, a mini-drama. We're caught
in a universe of collision and drift, the long slow ripples of the first Big Bang
as the cosmos breaks apart; the closest galaxies smash together, then those
that are left scatter and flee one another until each is alone and there's only
space, an expansion expanding into itself, an emptiness birthing itself, and in
105 the cosmic calendar as it would exist then, all humans ever did and were will
be a brief light that flickers on and off again one single day in the middle of
the year, remembered by nothing.

We exist now in a fleeting bloom of life and knowing, one finger-snap of
frantic being, and this is it. This summery burst of life is more bomb than bud.
These fecund times are moving fast.

110 (Late, so late, the six crew awake discombobulated from their post-film sleep.
Is it day or night? Have they got to the moon yet? What decade, what century
are we in?

It's 1.30 a.m.; several hours past the rigidly scheduled bedtime. Lucky
mission control turns the surveillance cameras off at night, they think, only
115 half in jest; otherwise we'd all get it in the neck.

In this half-sleep and confusion the strangeness of their lives for a moment
catches up with them. It finds them in a circle in the middle of the module
facing each other as if they've just met again after a long time apart. Without
word or reason they sail inwards and join, twelve arms interlinked. Buona
120 notte, o-yasumi, spakoynay nochee, sweet dreams, goodnight. Hands squeezing
shoulders and ruffling hair. Then propelling backwards, a brief look outside to
bright daylight flooding Florida, and each of them off to their quarters, where
the dark station thrums them back into sleep.)