

Meditation on the Interdependence of all Existence  
*Or: why the chicken crossed the road*

Before everything started to happen,  
just before time tiptoed into the universe,  
all matter was gathered together.  
Everything was there,  
dancing on the head of a pin,  
Everything that is, was, and will be, there at that primordial party.  
Nobody missed it,  
there wasn't even a need to send out invitations.  
You were there, I was there,  
The Buddha and the first baseman for the Chicago Cubs  
were there,  
as were the Napoleonic Wars,  
as were the freckles your cousin had when she was younger.

And there at that moment before there were moments,  
All matter reached across the infinite smallness,  
and held hands, as if getting ready to cross the street:  
The supernova and the orangutan,  
the celery plant and the bluefin tuna,  
all holding hands  
there at the precipice of being.  
We held hands,  
we looked both ways  
and all matter drew in its breath.

Ready?

*boom.*

Since then, things have been pretty chaotic.  
Everything started to happen, and it still is.  
You were there, and I was there,  
throughout it all,  
but much is beyond memory.  
I know for a fact it involved ice cream sundaes,

and sunshine streaming through forest trees,  
I know for a fact that Play-Doh squished flat onto highchairs had a part in it,  
as did electromagnetism,  
and the poetry of Walt Whitman.

There's even more to it than all that, though,  
so much more that if I could imagine a new thing every nanosecond for  
A billion, billion years,  
It would amount to only  
a single follicle  
on the great woolly mammoth  
of the majesty of everything.

Time kept everything from happening all at once,  
But sooner or later it all happens.  
It all gets worked out.  
Some of it has worked out mighty fine,  
like the time we played with water pistols  
up and down the block,  
And we discovered what it felt like when water and laughter and sunshine  
mix together in one person,  
along with schemes of really, really gigantic water balloons.  
Moments like that, you know,  
we're really going...  
nowhere  
in particular.

I mean,  
where else would you  
possibly  
want to be?

Some of it worked out pretty shitty,  
like words that are meant to wound or  
when children die before their parents.  
There are moments so bad that the next moment,  
Whatever it is, is a blessing,  
Bringing wounding and healing together in one motion.

I guess if there's any saving grace in all this,  
everything pretty much happens before you know it.

Time happens so quickly by the time something is happening  
It feels like it's already almost over.

One moment links arms with the next,  
Spinning in time's square dance  
Each moment too gallant  
to refuse as the next moment, taps their way in:  
"Of course, your turn, my dear, "  
Says the present to the future,  
And wanders off to the sidelines,  
standing there in that poorly lit hallway of nostalgia  
waxing rhapsodic to its buddies  
about what was and could have been  
over cold punch and cookies.

These moments  
are not made to last;  
even the memory  
does not last.

Only time's web survives,  
Each strand is scarcely more than empty air.

We knew this as kids, surely,  
For you and I, my friend, were lucky enough  
to get to experience the kind of childhood  
where we understood that joy was as perfectly real as the squirt-gun water  
that soaked through your T-shirt on a hot day,  
and lasted just as long.  
Hold on, hold on,  
to everything  
even as you learn to let go.

You  
were a friend from before I even knew how to spell the word.  
We lived on the same street.

We'd walk to school together.

You, me, Ben,  
the three of us.

I can barely remember what we did, because we did everything.  
When you share the beginning and the end of most every day,  
you don't make memories,  
you don't do anything so pompous as that,  
you just live together.

All the land was ours –  
this was back in the days, of course, when kids walked to school,  
and for latchkey kids like us  
the region between our classrooms and our kitchens  
was the Mediterranean,  
and we were Odysseus.  
Your back yard was sloped and had a basketball net,  
Ben's had a big dog that loved to say hello with a dog's tongue,  
My house was a block away, a long enough journey  
for travelling sheikhs  
or for a couple of kids on roller skates.

The world was ours, and we knew it.  
We belonged to the world, and we knew it.  
Everything was interconnected, the world held hands,  
the dandelion and the gum drop,  
the squirrel and the fairy tale dragon.  
Because the world and us were the same thing,  
we took care of it all together.  
All kids are conservationists, at first spell:  
why on earth, a kid might ask, would we want to use something  
and then, not use it again?  
There is no disposable to a child, no disposing –  
things are where they are,  
and that is where they're meant to be until we find them next.  
Kids need to be taught to use a garbage can, and  
perhaps this is the origin of sin:  
this is kept, but that is not kept,  
this is worthy, but that is not,

that is removed,  
and where it goes to few kids understand. It is just gone.

Then the world is separated,  
then the world is no longer holding hands.

If we do destroy our world,  
If aerosol cans and plastic bags and nuclear weapons  
And everything else we've created to keep life under control  
Will one day do us all in,  
If we do destroy our world  
The great shame of it all will not be that the world ends –  
For, after all, everything ends,  
Or at least it becomes something else –  
The great shame of it all will be that destruction happened  
just as we were beginning to really appreciate life.

There was a neighbor who used to yell at us sometimes,  
telling us not to touch his car (which we didn't),  
or walk through his yard (which we did).  
So when he went on vacation our gang filled up his pool  
with dirt and soap suds.  
It took a lot of trips,  
back and forth to the kitchen and the yard,  
to turn the pool from clear blue to murky green,  
but we did it.  
We knew, carrying plastic bottles  
filled with a mixture of water, mud, dishwasher liquid, and spit,  
that we were doing something  
wonderful,  
and terrible,  
and that the pool, which we had never swam in,  
was being devastated and returned.  
To this day, when I think about it,  
I find it hard for me to muster up  
the obligatory remorse.  
It was just such a perfect  
kind of a day, the kind of a day

that never quite leaves you.

My family moved a few streets away eventually,  
and we took separate busses to middle school,  
and our lives drifted apart, gradually,  
like galaxies with nothing better to do.

If I say you were a part of everything I did  
it sounds so dramatic, like a Hallmark card,  
when all I mean to say is  
every aspect of our lives, from childhood on,  
is always holding hands.

So it felt entirely natural when,  
fifteen years later,  
with jobs and travels, and girlfriends and wives,  
with memories that had become objects of devotion,  
with dreams that had become mulberry wine,  
no longer fresh but sweet to the taste,  
our lives happened to drift back together for a while.  
We were still us, pretty much,  
different but the same.

Neither of us had grown up much,  
by the reckoning of serious men:  
You were studying yoga with zen masters and playing horn  
on cruise ships, I was reading about the meaning of life  
when I wasn't on the soccer field.

We met in our hometown, and then in other towns too,  
in coffeeshops and bars,  
places foreign and exotic to our younger selves,  
places we had a passport to now,  
and while there we talked about the old days,  
and fell in love with our lives all over again.

Do you remember, Josh,  
you were the one who told me why the chicken crossed the road,  
which, at the time of whichever sleepover it was,  
was not a fateful truth about the nature of the universe,

but merely a way to annoy everyone at 3 am,  
when we were all starting to drift off,  
but you were not ready for us to sleep yet.  
Why did the chicken cross the road?  
Because it wasn't chicken!  
And then came the trumpet of your laugh,  
that laugh that could pierce silence once and for all  
and rattle the walls of Jericho,  
and then you'd get ready to tell the joke all over again.  
Maybe six or seven times,  
you told it,  
withstanding the pillows and the groans  
with which we battled your incessant joy.

The chicken wasn't chicken.  
That's what I love about evolution.  
None of us are quite what we currently are.  
The code of the universe twists and turns inside us, and change  
is as much a part of our nature as clay.

Who are we, really, but a momentary repositioning of the universe,  
a chicken crossing the road,  
on its way,  
one way or the other,  
to not being a chicken anymore.

When I learned that you had died,  
I was sitting in the attic of my apartment making plans for a trip to Paris.  
It was Ben that called, of course,  
And the pain in his voice was the only thing real to me,  
not your death, not anything in the words I was not prepared to hear.  
It was weeks before I really learned that you were gone,  
and it was not a lesson I learned at all well.  
You were too present,  
present when I walked the French streets with Ben,  
present when, at your memorial,  
everyone so obviously wore your fingerprints.

Who would not sing for you, my sweet friend?  
You were the breath that rustles through the reeds.  
You were the love of life for itself.  
I sing for you, and it is as if  
something very like you  
is still on the road, holding my hand.

After all what is death?  
Death means that everything has changed.  
That's all.  
It doesn't mean you're not here,  
In my life,  
Because after all if you weren't here how would I feel you here?  
And surely, it doesn't mean you're not there,  
In your life,  
Because you are free from time now,  
and your absence from your life  
is no more real  
than the absence of Miles Davis  
from *Kind of Blue*.

After all what is death?  
Death means that everything has changed.  
That's all.  
And after all what is life?  
Life means that everything has changed.  
That's all.

Both our lives will be only memory one day,  
and soon,  
not long in the great schemeless wanderings of it all,  
and not too long after that  
we'll be only the memory of memories,  
only the slightest hint of a prior sandcastle.  
And you know, I'm OK with that.

When it comes time,  
let me hold out my hand,  
and take my place there,

with the orangutan and the supernova,  
with the celery plant and the bluefin tuna,  
on the other side of that road.

We were together once, we still are together, and we will be together,  
as the music fades,  
and the dance winds down,  
and time pirouettes out of the room,  
and when everyone discovers again  
just how close we are,  
we will smile at one another,  
without hurry,  
and say, "wasn't that fun?"  
And you know what – it sure was,  
my brave Odysseus,  
my chicken who is not quite so chicken anymore,  
it sure was.

AMEN

*for Josh W.*

*Josh, and those who loved Josh, I'm sorry if I got the details wrong –  
the best I could do was stay true to the spirit of who he was to me.*

*"Time keeps everything from happening at once" is a Woody Allen paraphrase.*

*"Who would not sing for you" is from Wordsworth's poem "Lycidas".*