

LECH MAJEWSKI

METAPHYSICS

(excerpts)

1

What does it mean, that someone exists? Is it just that I can see them alive and moving, talk with them, touch them? I can't touch you, although I can touch those few personal effects that you imprinted with the shape of your body - your high-heeled shoe with a worn out sole, black bra, wax earplugs. Your favourite dress, the one you wore under your coat during our last walk round the Ilia de Pietro, no longer embraces your body - it lies here on the bed, provoking me. It's ended up in the bin a few times, once I took it to the Salvation Army...

2

All I know about the first three months after your funeral is that I spent them in Venice. When I returned to London, I shut myself up in my flat and lay or slept in front of the TV set, digesting the most stupid programmes, i.e. everything television has to offer. Every day I committed hara-kiri with the blunt knife of my television set, until I had eviscerated my head of any pain. And I slept all the time. I slept a lot. Sleep prolongs life; it conserves life, paradoxically bringing

us closer to death. The word 'cemetery', after all, comes from the Greek, meaning sleeping chamber...

Humans sleep for a third of their lives, usually twenty-five years. And they dream for five. That's when they abandon their bodies, walk through walls, rise above the waters and devour their own hearts. At night they throw off the three-dimensional shells of their bodies and enter the world of higher dimensions, to do things so beautiful and so cruel that they laugh like children and scream in terror. They inhabit the garden of delight and awe, and their senses, returning as they awaken, do everything they can to deny these journeys. Because they have control over the first three dimensions, while the higher ones are beyond their grasp. The lower the dimension, the greater the degree of slavery. Life is torment, says Krishnamurti, death is liberation. Do the dying, like the sleeping, throw off their bodies to enter a higher dimension permanently?

3

When I couldn't sleep any longer, I went on hunger strike. I ate nothing for eight days, drinking only tea with sugar. I switched off the television and for five months read absolutely everything I could find on the subject of death.

I read dozens of books, but got the impression they were full of nonsense. Wishful thinking at best. When discussing death, the writers, poets and philosophers curled up like hedgehogs and cringed away. Generally towards religion. Those who believed that there's nothing after death, only emptiness, darkness, a void, wrote without conviction. They simply couldn't be convinced of something that was unprovable. There was only a line from Voltaire and some of Seneca's remarks in your notebook...

"We don't meet our death suddenly, it approaches us gradually, so that we die a little every day. Each day some fragment of life leaves us, and even when we're growing, life is getting shorter. Our childhood is over, then our adolescence. However much time has passed since yesterday is gone; the day we're spending now also belongs partly to death. We meet death at an appointed hour, but it takes a while to get there." I find comfort in this extract, from one of Seneca's letters to Lucilius, written in your notebook. Then this, his condolences for Polibius: "The road which leads to death is one common to us all. Why do we cry over the inevitability of death? The dead don't leave us, they precede us. Believe me, the necessity of death contains great happiness. Nothing is certain, even for one day." The extract from Seneca's letter to Lucilius, written in your notebook, calms me. I wake up in

the middle of the night and copy it out a few times. Writing to you, talking to you.

4

I have to speak, to talk to you. Nobody else would listen. People don't listen to others, just to themselves. And they sift through the words of others to find what resonates in themselves. I know that you can hear me. After all, you planted yourself in me as seeds of love and desire, and through their constant growth you talk with me. You speak inside me, and I answer. And even though you're gone and your biology is dead, your thoughts have taken root in the barren earth of mine.

With you I was often silent, ashamed of my inability to express myself. We carry other people's words in our train of thought along tracks laid by someone else, unable to say anything honest, even at confession. I never liked trains condemned to the rails, or cars dependent on roads. That's probably why I studied at the Maritime College and qualified as a ship's architect.

Before I met you I studied mathematics, physics, astronomy, any rational, measurable science - not just because of my profession, but also for the sheer pleasure of it. For me, knowledge was intellectual entertainment, and only your death made me re-examine all the basic questions. No, I was never fond of contemplating generalities - they were fearfully vague, stupefyingly incomprehensible, but, when in book after book I failed to find any reliable knowledge about death, I ventured into the realm of metaphysics.

5

What is death? The disintegration of matter? The destruction of the ego's consciousness? Or maybe just separation - someone's disappearance from our sight and feelings? How many people have I buried alive, and how many have buried me, although I am, I feel, I think and I'm writing these words? There were strong bonds between us, we lived together and experienced similar emotions, then, suddenly and without warning, we stopped meeting, phoning, writing. Usually for trivial reasons: someone left, changed address, said some unkind words or looked at somebody the wrong way. Or, more often, seemed to look the wrong way, or we heard from someone that they'd said something or other and so bridges built over

months and years collapsed and sank into the river of routine, and neither side seemed eager to rebuild them.

The only difference between those deaths, apart from the obvious physical one, concerns potential. There are a lot of friends and acquaintances I'll probably never meet again, but the potential is there - one fine day, I'll turn a corner and bump into one of them, slap him on the back and go to the pub, then we'll drown ourselves in memories. Or some day I'll build, or buy, a house on the Virgin Islands, on St. Croix in Frederiksted, and invite my friends there on holiday. And it's irrelevant that none of that will ever happen, and that when our paths do cross, we talk banalities and keep a safe distance with a howareyou, and a notbadhowsyourself, looking round nervously, unconsciously searching for an escape route.

So is death the end of potential? One of life's paths has been bricked off and slapped with a death certificate, is that it? But there are so many people who might be near, whom we might love, and we don't even know if they're in a different house, a different street or just through the wall.

I can hear you laughing. You find my awkward speculating so amusing. You're laughing inside me. I can hear you, so you're in me... Do you remember in Venice, two months before your death, how you cried out in your sleep? You woke up clinging on to me with all your might, feeling that our bodies had become one. Remember? You said that my body was an extension of yours. And I felt exactly the same. Remember? Darling, do you remember?

I remember. So that moment will live on as long as I'm capable of remembering.

Memory is life.

Memory...

"We remember things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened," wrote Oscar Wilde. Memory constantly adjusts reality, picking out only that which it understands or finds interesting. A hundred people enter the same room and when they leave they remember a hundred different things. A botanist remembers the pot plants, a painter the colour of the walls, a lazybones the armchair, and a mathematician the geometric proportions of the pattern on the carpet. And if I relied wholly on my senses, I'd have recognised long ago that the degree of deformation of the past is great enough.

But my memory has become concrete. It has been caught in the eye of the camera - electronics seeing and taking notes on magnetic tape, remembering sound as well as sight, physical facts. I can freeze any frame, study it, contemplate it, and it's more real than you. Because you no longer have physical form. It has disintegrated into purifying chemistry. At the bottom of a tree.

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It's amazing that a picture is more permanent than a body, a trace more permanent than a life, as if an entire complex realm of tissues, cells, molecules and atoms had come into being merely to fall apart, while the trace - a few electromagnetic reactions on a thin band of tape - survives.

I watch through piles of cassettes I'd recorded you on with an amateur video camera, and I can't decide. I don't know where to begin or how to do it, but I yearn to put together some form of film from all these fragments - a story about you.

I bought another video and connected it to the old one, now I'm trying to start editing. How can I sew up shreds of reality without throwing together a figure that masquerades as you? So that's why I started to take notes.

In the opening scene you're lying naked on the bed in our apartment on Riva dei Sette Martiri. In the background, the bulk of a passenger ship appears in the window. The ship is leaving Venice, and the sight of groups of passengers on board make you sit up on the bed and wave to them. The faces sailing past, your excitement, the closeness of the ship almost brushing against the windows, the taste of sea travel and the sweetness of separation all ensure that the scene, though out of focus and chaotic, is the quintessence of our life in Venice.

I remember the story about Marcel Duchamp, who spent the last twenty years of his life locked away in his New York studio. He was trying to create a realistic sculpture, covered in tanned leather and wax, of his Brazilian lover. Reclining lazily, thighs open, the memory of a few evenings of a cool European chess-player's brain being thawed by the heat of a South American body.

But after the first scene I don't know how to continue the editing. A feeling of powerlessness overcomes me. I am in pain, so much so that I want to take my dose of television and shove the videotapes into a drawer. And when I sit like that,

empty, immobile, remembering your body, (Duchamp could touch his creation, he even lived with her - the FBI's lab discovered his DNA in traces of sweat, saliva and sperm on the sculpture's skin) I hear you say: "If you don't know where to start, start at the beginning."

10

Chronology? Why not. Some force ultimately arranged our existence into strange before and afters, deluding us with cause-and-effect logic, and we, lost and estranged, believe that yesterday preceded today, and that tomorrow will replace yesterday, as if we didn't realize that tomorrow and yesterday are illusions corroborated only by the decay of matter which is the only universal timepiece, a power of the body but not the spirit.

Right. Chronology. In that case I should start at St.

Catherine's Dock, a quay for yachts near Tower Bridge, that spring afternoon when the cold dampness of London permeated to the very bone. You were standing on a gangway between the old P&O ferry terminal and a barge settled on the oily bed of the Thames. Looking up at you - a figure silhouetted against the grey of the sky, with shapely calves extending from under a

rust-coloured overcoat - I felt a yearning to approach you, introduce myself and invite you to the nearby cafe for a plate of hot soup. But I didn't move. I cowered on the beam suspended above the barge's hold and nothing would have happened, you would have stepped back onto dry land and I into the hold, but fortunately, as usual in our relationship, you were brave enough to speak first.

It intrigued you how the barge could possibly be resting on sludge and not on the water, who had dragged it there and why, and my explanation that the Thames rises thirty feet twice a day failed to satisfy you.

"Thirty feet? But that's a three storey building."

"Yes."

"You're joking."

"Not at all..." I clambered onto the gangway. "Luis Malten at your service," I gave you my card.

"Bea Cossan," you gave me your hand.

I kissed it, to your mild surprise, and thanks to this old-fashioned trick learnt from my Polish mother I caught the almond scent of your skin.

"Luis Malten, nautical engineer, 13 Evangelist Rd., Kentish Town, London NW5," you read aloud and smiled. "Maybe we could go for some hot soup?"

You expressed my thoughts. And that amazing synchronicity began to accompany us right up until your death. No. It still accompanies us. Even now.

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The moon of our modern age, rising and setting in our homes, is the TV screen. That's what defines the day's rhythm, attracts and repels, awakens and calms. It illuminates our immobile pupils with its deadly light. It wields power over all sublunar matter. We don't live, we watch, and television lives for us. In a mobile trinity, it's everywhere and nowhere. Why move, why think, when it knows and answers for us, leads a rich existence in the company of painted blondes and gigolos, their teeth and knotted ties flawless. If Bosch were alive, he wouldn't be painting moon children, but TV children drowning in a technically perfect hell, where production funds are always available.

I sit in the monitor's moonlight, too, and watch yet again the cassettes with your lectures about Bosch. Your finger wanders through the bottomless pit of his imagination, drawing circles in the air and touching fragments of the reproductions, picking out details the way you touched the ash tree, only more sensitively. I lose myself in the sound of your voice,

which still excites me, and I don't think about your words, only about you.

You threw yourself into recording your comments on the *Garden*, just as you'd promised Elms, but gave up after the first tape; you had to use words too often in describing what Bosch had painted. So you decided to record your narrations on video, and entrusted me with the function of cameraman. Taking advantage of this chance to see you more often, I bought a tripod and a reflector for my camera, and set it all up in your Drury Lane flat.

We recorded more than eight hours. You spoke, showing what you were talking about, rustling the illustrations of Fraenger's book, I followed your finger into the reproduction, then once again returned to the full shot and focussed in on your face. You looked into the lens and spoke fluidly, almost hypnotically, and I slowly moved in on your lips. I quickly corrected the shot, realizing that the tape wasn't meant for my eyes. I was merely a go-between for you and Elms, and it was he who would watch your lips, freeze them with his pause button, photograph them, kiss them, and God knew what else my newly awakened monster was whispering to me.

Yes, the more time I spent with you, the more I loved you, and the thought that I wasn't worthy of you, and that that

egocentric despot Elms would seduce you, kept me from sleeping. Tossing and turning in my bed, I thought out dramatic ways of tearing you away from his masculine charms, and endlessly cursed the moment when I'd thought of introducing you to him. It had reduced me to the role of an amateur cameraman, making videos that formed a love letter from you to him.

And you described everything in them; the moon, which you often called by its Latin name of *Luna*, and Venus; Luna's relationship with ships and trees, and Venus' with music, shells and fountains. You spoke about Prince Pico della Mirandola, who believed the earthly paradise was the Kingdom of Venus, and his neo-platonic idea of love. You explained fountains of Life and fountains of Youth. The symbolism of birds and fish, the butterfly and the toad, the pumpkin and the wild strawberry. The golden alignment of Sun and Moon in Pisces on June 6th 1504, and the sufferings of love, using Jacob Böhme's description of them as " a bath of thorns and thistles..." Until there came a day when, looking at you through the lens, I couldn't hold back my feelings any longer and they burst out in confusion and stupidity, with me yelling at you how much I loved you, and how I couldn't stand operating the camera for somebody else, especially someone who was going to take you away from me and condemn me, once again, to the icy solarium of the computer screen.

You listened in astonishment, smiling, as if this outburst concerned someone else, and then put your finger to your lips, commanding silence. It was amazing how such a simple gesture, conveying no authority, could calm me. Then you did something I would never have expected... I thought that before my pain had overtaken me, I had switched off the camera. But I hadn't, I'd been too stirred up and had forgotten. Left standing unprotected on the tripod, it tilted slightly upwards to show only our heads, but then tilted down to concentrate on our feet. But it preserved every word.

Now I'm watching the moment where you slowly undress, staring at me. You sort your hair, and when you take your skirt off you lean forward. I hear my excited breathing. I step in front of the camera and take you by the shoulders. I lift you up and kiss you. You return the kisses; your hand roams through my hair, strokes me then abruptly pulls away.

"Undress first," you order.

I hurriedly obey.

"Stay where you are," you shake your head when I walk towards you naked, "Hold out your hand and touch the top of my head."

I do as you wish, and you reciprocate the touch. We stand immobile - you with your eyes shut, and I, electrified, observing you, not knowing whether you're doing this to make amends for my pain, soothe the monster of jealousy, or to buy

me, wanting to pay me for the hours I've spent as your camera servant.

Now I pause the tape. I rewind it and watch it again. This scene excites me, although our nakedness isn't visible. Only our heads are, and even they are out of focus. I can't remember what I was thinking then. I only remember the surprise, the embarrassed reflex of wanting to step towards you, my erect, to enter you immediately, standing up.

You open your eyes, lightly repel me, and say:

"What for? After all, we're in Paradise..."

I mumble something which I don't understand, and you touch my toes with the tips of yours and point to a reproduction hanging in your flat, the motif of the triptych's left segment; Christ, clad in pink, stands in the middle of Eden: with his left hand he touches Eve's right wrist, while his right foot touches the left foot of Adam, seated on the ground. I remember your words about the energy emanating from the body's extremities - touching was the initiation ritual of the Brothers of the Free Spirit.

You look into the lens and ask, worriedly, if the camera is on. I answer no, of course not.

"Check!" you order. "We're not showing this to anyone."

On a map, Venice resembles two fish devouring one another. We lived at the base of the larger one's tail. On the second floor, by the Riva dei Sette Martiri, in a neo-gothic building with magnolia-coloured walls. The white-framed windows overlooked the waters of the lagoon; the view from the kitchen was of a narrow canal, whose stagnant water would occasionally permeate the air. You loved that smell. The smell of death. That, and the endless vista of the lagoon's waters, was the reason you agreed to rent the place. You also liked the fact that Gianbattista Tiepolo, the painter of heaven, was born in the nearby Calle San Domenico, by the almshouse.

After settling the formalities you shut the door, stripped naked and stood motionless in the middle of the front room. I undressed too, and, without a word, switched on the camera.

I approach you from behind. I caress your back, neck, hair. My hands fit your buttocks perfectly. Then I stand in front of you and put my hand on your head. You do the same, like a mirror image. We stay like that. Our feet touch. My excitement rises. My manhood throbs against your navel. I kneel down and kiss your stomach. My face can't be seen, but you turn and smile at the camera, as if you want to transmit that smile

beyond your death, to me, as I capture the moment in the freeze frame.

I look at it, then rewind and stop. Sparks fly as I touch the screen. I let the tape run slowly and again freeze the moment when you turn around. When I kiss you tiny needles of sparks burn my lips. You are electricity and I am Dr. Frankenstein animating your body. I press the button and you look away. I press it again and you look at me.

The courage in your gaze, and the almost perverse twinkle in your eye warm up my underbelly. Looking straight into your frozen pupils, I realize that I'd never been a good lover and it was only you that cured my torturous paralysis. My first girlfriends, at school, intimidated more than aroused me. When I hurriedly made love to them, at home when my parents were out, in the back of a car, at parties, in toilets, I would rush to get it over with as quickly as possible, in fear of my erection suddenly waning and making me a laughing stock for the rest of my life. I would think about anything other than the person I was with, I thought about the smells she gave off, pornographic photos, shameful diseases, pregnancy, forced marriage, the horror of defecation; lovemaking was a torture like among the American Indian tribes who make adolescent boys slash their stomachs with knives and rub salt in their wounds, to prove they've become men.

With my wife it started off well; we discovered our bodies, amazed by our newly wed rush of freedom, and never got out of bed. But we soon overdosed, and my wife ever more rarely let me near her, always with the lights out and her eyes shut. Then came divorce, celibacy, work and study, study and work in the solitude of Evangelist Road, in front of the computer screen, which came to replace the real world almost completely. It even took me on dates with other women - at one point I was having five Internet affairs at the same time. I felt like a modern day Casanova, and, to raise my self confidence even further, I went for Internet whores who stripped in front of the lens of a far-off camera, and followed my on-screen demands to the letter.

Yes. I grew attached to my computer. I became over-familiar with it and forgot there was another world. And then you appeared; you fell on me like rain on parched earth. You woke me up, and I could repeat your words, that I was living for the first time, too, doing things on the spur of the moment that I'd never expected in my wildest dreams, and I was happy and more and more terrified at the thought of losing you.

Venice is a net of stone cast over the map-reading wanderer. Instead of space, a labyrinth of twisting, bending walls, and where space does appear, suddenly and unexpectedly, it's enormous, shimmering with the glare of the water and palace facades. For many people, Venice is also a monster. A monster that can suck in, grind and chew up any number of tourists. Crowded vaporettos feed Piazza San Marco's bottomless stomach. There's even a street leading into it called *Bocca di Piazza*, the mouth of the square.

As soon as we'd got the flat sorted out, we started roaming day and night round Venice, endlessly circling, losing and refinding our way. You were truly happy. I embraced and kissed you on bridges and in narrow alleys, in front of shop displays and inside churches, for the first time completely unselfconscious. Usually I was weighed down by the eyes of others, the more imaginary than real barbed wire of paralysis, but not this time. The wind tugged at our coats, passers-by bumped into us, and we stayed grafted together with a kiss in the midst of a crowd.

We made love just as intensively, not only at home - once in the German pavilion, after sneaking through a hole in the fence of the Biennale garden site, another time, at night, at

a traghetto stop by the Canale Grande. In fact it was a threesome: you, Venice and me. She was there physically embracing us, providing sweet lapping sound and aromas, those connected with the palate, tasting and swallowing.

As far as the German pavilion goes, you joked then that we were a piece of Exhibitionist Art that would've pleased a critic or two. You tried to get into the neighbouring British pavilion, but it was well secured for the winter.

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We returned to the Catholic section. I sat down on a stone bench, watching your calves, as you carried on absently kicking stones. Squeezed into stockings, smooth and light, I still found them hypnotic. This time I knelt down, grabbed one of them and kissed it. You went still. I reached under your tweed skirt and felt the warmth of your stomach. Your heels excited me, sticking out from under straps. I wanted to make love to you among all that chemistry, death, leaves, graves and stars, and connect with the warm, fragrant, damp pulse inside you. But the belfry summoned our funeral procession through the gate and you pulled me up by the hair.

The cortege approached the wall that sliced the cemetery. Marble reliefs in alcoves marked the tombs of rich families. Those who paid most have chapels built into the wall like boxes at the theatre. Behind the wall, though, in the area sequestered from the lagoon (the whole cemetery is a giant landfill spreading round the Franciscan monastery) is a villa district, a necropolis for the richest: mausoleums carved in stone with colonnades and life-size sculptures of crying women petrified on broad stairs, touching marble tombstones and coffins. Graves like miniature Greek temples in the shadow of cypresses, larches and arborvitae. Monuments to peaceful suffering, with sculpted angels gazing at candles.

At the burial site, under the high cemetery wall, the procession broke up into smaller groups, caught in the web of memorials and frozen in concentration. We stopped far from the grave. You squeezed my hand more and more. The coffin, carried on straps by four pallbearers, disappeared into the dark cavity. In the background above the wall laboured modern cranes, stubbornly extending the landfill, this time not just for graves, but also for blocks of flats made for coffins and urns. One we stumbled across looking for Stravinsky was five storeys high with fifty segments, capacity for at least two hundred tiny coffins. Life in tower blocks, death in containers. Death as industry. Even in Venice.

The mourners moved in single file, scattering clumps of earth over the coffin. The resounding thud of the first handful gradually gave way to a loose dry sound, and the widow, as she accepted condolences, removed her left shoe to touch her sole against the damp ground.

"Somebody once wrote that death is only given to parts and not to the whole" - you said.

"More like the other way round," I countered, "The parts, the elements, are indestructible even when the whole thing, the consciousness, dies."

I immediately regretted my words. There had been hope in what you said, and I'd taken it away. But on the other hand I believed that only vexation could get us used to it. We shrink away from the thought of it, like from some hideous, unwanted and avoidable infection, when of course it awaits us all.

Without exception. Earlier cultures taught people to stare it in the face. And it wasn't all that terrifying at all; more like a source of relief, a way of putting most of our struggles into a proper perspective. Whereas nowadays we bury our dead in a hurry, and the priest's routine alleviates the ungainly burden from the mourners. In the age of total entertainment, funerals are alien and unwanted. A duty, which should be discharged as quickly as it can be forgotten.

"The key to everything we've been talking about lies hidden behind the secret of the passing of time," I thought aloud. "Clocks teach us that time is something constant, evenly measured out into ticks, and running forward. But time is an abstract. Only matter is subject to change. Time cheats the senses. Its existence would be proof of the cruelty of the Creator. How can it be? Are we rushing headlong towards annihilation, with no chance to turn back? Are we only digging one tunnel through reality, having to pay for every mistake, and even if we did manage to live every second perfectly, at the end would there still be entropy, wrinkles, old age and death?"

Some people queuing at the grave lit cigarettes and puffed greedily. Those who had already passed on their condolences were virtually running for the exit. Only the immediate family remained at the widow's side.

"And how does science explain time?" you gazed at the widow. "Physicists claim that if time exists, its only dimension is movement. Movement in space is a natural clock hand. And movement is obviously possible in any direction, forwards, sideways and backwards," I drew signs in the air. "For the astrophysicist John Wheeler, time can go backwards. Causes follow effects, and Man is responsible for the creation of the universe, rather than the other way round."

"So why do we grow older, and not younger?"

"You're talking about time as measured by the body. Every form of matter, including our bodies, is a clock. It decomposes in its own time, in its own movement through space, but even so we can't be sure we're not getting younger. We don't know the wider context, only the short flow of life."

"What the physicists say goes against common sense."

"I told you our senses often deceive us. For Plato, everything available to the senses was illusion."

"And if not?"

"Then there are no galaxies, because we can't see them, fish don't communicate, because we can't hear them..."

"Right, right..." you interrupted impatiently, "so why does time move so fast?"

"What time? Of what? It flows differently for different phenomena, but follows a certain law: the smaller the dimensions, the slower it passes. A second for an amoeba is a year in the life of a human, and ten light years for a galaxy. The theory of relativity states that any expansion of time must be accompanied by a shrinking of space. And that's why the first second of the infinitesimal Universe, immediately after its birth, lasted so long and was the most important of the vast number of seconds in its fifteen billion year history, since it sowed the seeds of everything that bears fruit today... The infinitesimal spawned the infinite."

I can't remember if our conversation went like that. If my words were clear or a confused, reticent stammering. Sharing knowledge, ideas, not to mention feelings, was never my strong point. I was a reserved (paralysed might be a better description) kind of person, and the fact that I knelt and kissed you so unceremonially in the cemetery just goes to show what passion you awoke in me. I can't even remember whether I told you everything then, or if those thoughts are really taking shape only now that I'm writing them down without inhibitions.

I studied maths, physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology and computers, believing that somewhere there was a link between them all, that a Higher Force had created the world according to some exceptionally simple and beautiful pattern that we observe through cracks and keyholes (as a child, staring up at the starry sky, I believed that the stars were pinholes in the curtain of heaven, and that behind the curtain shone the light of a million suns) and we're unable to conceive the whole scheme because our brains, or rather the senses which guard our minds, are primitive and neglected. A stray mongrel smells, tastes, hears and sees more than the most mentally fit human - the dog's problem (if it's really a problem for him)

is his small brain, ours is our exceptionally small range of perception.

I'm telling you this because you're the first person who's ever wanted to listen. My wife, despite being a computer programmer, considered my knowledge dull schoolboy stuff. Given the choice of conversation and absolutely any film on TV, the TV won. For my part, I found most films boring, predictable, as if the people who made them had decreed that life can follow only a few scenarios: shooting, chasing, betrayal and violence, nothing else was worth showing.

But I don't want to get into exaggeration and simple generalisations. Sometimes I saw films that moved me deeply, like Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*, and there in the cemetery I thought about it - maybe because the gravediggers lifted up the heavy tombstone and stood it up on end. Supporting the marble slab, they looked like characters from that film. They touched the shining surface of the stone with the same reverence.

"Maybe time passes so quickly because our dimension is small?"

"Maybe... The speed we travel through space at isn't constant, it slows down, and that's why time seems to pass more quickly."

"I don't understand."

"Think of a foetus. Think of the great speed this microscopic organism starts its journey with. It travels in the womb at close to light speed, like a rocket blasting through millions, hundreds of millions of years of evolution. It starts as a simple, unicellular organism and suddenly and imperceptibly becomes a more and more complex multicellular creature, then a fish swimming in the amniotic waters, complete with gills. Here," I indicated my eye sockets and cheeks, "And finally it heads for the land. In the womb it becomes a furry four-legged mammal (that's why newborn babies are covered with down, which they lose later), and even grows a tail and horns."

"You're joking."

"No I'm not. Those are facts. The biology of a foetus. Some premature babies are born with horns on their heads, but nowadays they're surgically removed. Once, traces of horns were considered a sign of the wisdom of the chosen ones. That's why Michaelangelo's sculpture of Moses has little horns. Horns of wisdom."

"Your interpretation of a foetus' life seems a bit odd," you said.

"Not mine, science's. Only the metaphor of the womb as the cabin of a space craft moving at light speed is mine."

"And what about the cabin?"

"That's it. It's outlived its usefulness. It's too small and cramped. It ejects the foetus out of the womb and into another

space, a dry space, massive and utterly terrifying. It's this terror which activates the system for adapting to this new dimension, the work of the lungs and heart, the desperate cry, and the baby is by now unstoppable, continuing to develop with a truly dizzying momentum. The eyes start to see, the ears hear, and the brain absorbs an amount of information so massive that it would overload and burn out all the computers in the world joined together. You see, a second of human brain activity demands as many electrical connections between its cells as the inhabitants of a city like London use in a day, switching on and off all their lights, fridges, coffee machines and televisions."

"Time is stretched because the baby is small?"

"Something like that. For a year-old child, one year is a hundred per cent of its life, for a seventy-year-old, it's a mere seventieth. Simple mathematics, but the real key lies elsewhere."

"Where, then?"

"In slowing down. Despite the rapid progress the body's still making, it's getting slower. A ten-year-old grows more slowly than a five-year-old, a fifteen-year-old than a ten-year-old. Finally, after twenty years, the body stops growing, or rather it creates cells at the same rate as it uses them up, and by thirty not much is happening. Then it slows even more drastically, brakes screeching, it goes limp, it uses itself

up without regenerating until it's too slow to operate its internal pumping stations, the power plants necessary to live..."

"Now I know where wrinkles come from," you burst out laughing, "The braking effect. Skin stretches by screeching against the surface of time."

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You record me constructing a globe from bags we bought in a shop on Via Garibaldi. I tape different pieces together, not always getting it right. Finally, with the help of scaffolding thrown together from wires and string, I manage to raise the cocoon above the bed. We crawl into it, naked, not yet satisfied.

In the next scene, you're asleep inside the cocoon with your head resting on a bunch of grapes like the one in the *Garden* under the bladder. The ibis in the waters of the fountain nourishes the woman with a wild strawberry impaled on its needle-sharp beak, and I impale strawberries on a hairpin wake you up and feed you.

I realise that our neighbour with the scabby bald skull is spying on us. I wouldn't have noticed him standing hidden in the darkness of his apartment, but his anxious hands betrayed him. He kept lifting and shaking them, as if trying to get rid of something stuck to his long fingers. I close the shutters.