

Greg Wrenn

TREES

“They are evergreen and the wood almost incorruptible.”
—William Bartram, on live oaks in Florida

For too long today I’ve been searching for a husband, exchanging messages with men like the vegan ski instructor with the brachiosaurus tattoo. He said he wanted to take me for a “test drive.” With two taps on the screen, I blocked him. He vanished. Withered poppies swayed outside my apartment window—was it Dolly Parton who said, “If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain”? Only the men who ignored me seemed marriageable, like the blond bearded doctor 11 miles away, holding a puppy beside an alpine lake. He is, the app alerts me, one of its most beloved members. His silence met my entitlement, and by the time shadows stretched across my rug, I didn’t like myself. I should have been teaching at the shelter, calling my father about his blood work, hiking the redwoods twenty minutes away. In this numb blur of a cyborg life, what would it take to be happy?

It’s five o’clock now and I’m finally going outside. I sit the only place I know to, in front of the big maple in the backyard. I try to look at it as if I were seeing a tree for the first time, as if it were a cave painting I had just discovered on an alien planet and my oxygen were running low. As if I were a curious eel who had shimmied onshore to experience the terrestrial unknown—you have ten minutes, I tell myself, maybe nine, till you have to get back to your home, the maple-less bay. And then the maple leaves look a bit greener. Sharper. Even from here I can tell that each leaf, with its seven pointy lobes, curls a bit, holding the wasted afternoon’s sunlight and shadows. In the gathering wind, the branches rise and fall, creaking, like the deck of a schooner sailing through a lagoon, and the whole maple, I sense, is vibrating. Its leaves and limbs, phloem and xylem. Electrons and subquark strings.

Branches fall; branches rise; leaves quiver.

More than anything else, the many, many leaves remind me of the multiverse theory. It says there are an infinite number of universes constantly being born, expanding, and dying out, like froth bubbles at the mouth of a marsh crab. And within those various universes, because atoms can be arranged in only so many ways, stuff endlessly recurs and anything is possible. In other words, infinite copies of this maple exist; this exact same moment is happening an infinite number of times elsewhere. In endless elsewhere the maple in my

backyard is instead a pile of rotting logs; it's made of steel, home to thousands of winged, fire-breathing lemurs; it's succumbing to radiation exposure, one branch holding Frida Kahlo's tortoise-shell earrings. Right now countless maples and Muppets and manatees are dreaming of a tall, hairy being, in sweatpants and a blue T-shirt, typing this self-conscious sentence, hearing, from deep within the canopy, the squeaky, drawn-out chirps of hummingbirds, which sound like annoying ringtones. No moment is ever really lost. Whatever you can imagine is true.

I'm recalling that in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes, "If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross," which legends say was made of dogwood. Friedrich Nietzsche, Kundera declares, considered "the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens," but that kind of infinitude reassures me: neither the maple nor I have to be perfect this go around. I don't feel nailed to anything. And that the tree isn't digitized is a relief, too. It quiets my breathing, this beauty that feels more and more real and nourishing, like the brownish-green waves I'd stare at alone as a closeted teenager in Florida.

I reach for my phone—Dr. Adonis of the Alpine Lake, did you hit me up while I was looking away? No. And, in the most obvious move, I turn it off.

You see, I'm embarrassed to tell you the obvious: I'm an anti-citizen with a weapon of mass distraction. When my rage toward climate change deniers overwhelms me, I can tap a screen till I've arranged dates with three different strangers. When I visualize my maple dying in the Bay Area's increasingly arid climate, I can tell myself that elsewhere in the multiverse endless copies of the tree are thriving. When I imagine the ocean in 2050 without wild fish, which Stanford biologist Stephen Palumbi and others predict, I can try and envision parallel civilizations that value conservation over sheer profit. USAs whose Supreme Courts refused to hand the presidency to George W. Bush, twenty days before a new century began. Arctics where walrus milk doesn't contain the active ingredient in hand sanitizers.

What comforts and horrifies me is that the multiverse theory implies our fictions are someone else's facts: the imagination plays documentary footage of other universes, unwitting reconnaissance of their multiplicities. In alternate universes, our visions of paradise and the underworld are realities; cavewomen ride pterodactyls and mermen sing to sailors; our lives are someone else's admonishing fables. Uncontaminated ecosystems exist on other copies of Earth, but not this one.

"But I don't want another Earth," I say to myself as a squirrel races up the trunk. Quantum physics trivia churns in my brain: there's a chance, infinitesimally small, that a passage through space-time could open up right here, right now. I've stopped really seeing the maple. Instead I'm fantasizing that

physicists have created a stable wormhole: my mother and I are woken from cryogenic sleep and taken to the stargate, and walk through with our snorkels, masks, and fins to the Florida Keys a millennium ago, before Governor Rick Scott—when asked if humans were responsible for climate change—said, “I’m not a scientist”; before Kathie Lee Gifford’s waterfront mansion was built; before Kathie Lee Gifford’s poop, my poop, and that of 3.2 million yearly visitors turned once-abundant elkhorn coral into a critically endangered species; before my brother joked he would dredge a reef and dump it onto our front lawn for me; before Key lime groves for Key lime pies; before propellers razed the seagrass and anchors smashed the coral; before the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 and Henry Flagler’s overseas railway; before Lincoln’s assassin’s doctor was locked up at Fort Jefferson and his guards roasted sea turtles for dinner; before conquistador Ponce de Leon, seeing some of the Keys in the distance, named them Los Martires because “the rocks as they rose to view appeared like men who were suffering.” The Calusa and Tequesta lived there then in villages, and the Atlantic wasn’t warming or acidifying.

Snorkeling off Key Largo in 1014 C.E., my mother and I might go blind from the apatite blue of schooling stoplight parrotfish, the butter-and-eggs glare of French grunts, schoolmasters, scrawled cowfish, and rock beauties, the amethyst-plum of sea fans dotted with flamingo tongues, and the saffron, nearly the color of my thirsty poppies, of the endless acres of elkhorn and staghorn. Caribbean monk seals, now extinct, would nip our fins. The schools of sharks would scare us. Pretty soon we’d want to go back through the stargate.

My eyes go back to the maple. Its branches cup upward like elkhorn coral’s. They rise and fall and haven’t yet burst forth with much meaning. And I remember that while I was waiting for a haircut I read in *Scientific American* about a gravitational beacon that was emitted “a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a second” after the Big Bang. At the end of the article, I was told that given the infinite number of universes suggested by the multiverse theory, each with its own laws of physics, “it is possible that the underlying physical constants in our universe are what they are simply by accident. If they were any different, beings like us could not evolve to measure them.” The hairs on my head, even before the barber called my name, felt meaningless.

A lot feels meaningless, this late in the day. Is suffering meaningful? It does have a scent. When living branches of elkhorn coral are exposed to white pox bacteria from human poop, mucus is released, which in the lab “almost has a sweet smell, with a little bit of the scent of alcohol,” Dr. Erin Lipp at the University of Georgia told me. “There is more, but it is hard to capture.” But the maple? How would I know if it were in pain? It’s rustling, not writhing. Look at where a branch was pruned; the stump is black and looks wet. The man across the redwood fence wants to cut down the whole tree, which he says he owns. I

stand and reach up to break off a dry, fairly brown leaf, putting it in the center of my palm like a compass.

Back inside, sitting at the table, I turn my phone back on. A PDF loads of *Travels* by William Bartram, the British naturalist who explored the Florida wilderness before the Revolutionary War. Ignoring messages from two new dudes, I begin to read, swiping and zooming in to my favorite moment, when he's sitting by the St. Johns River at Lake George, only a hundred miles upstream from where I grew up. I feel a stillness I can't explain and see myself with him underneath a huge live oak. We've just finished a supper of jerky and oranges. William pours me another glass of muscadine wine, and we're breathing together in silence at twilight, batting away mosquitoes. I pick a bit of moss from his shirt; he removes an ant from mine. After a while he scribbles a bit in his journal by candlelight—"the balmy winds breathed the animating odours of the groves around me; and as I reclined on the elevated banks of the lake, at the foot of a Live Oak, I enjoyed the prospect of its wide waters, its fringed coasts, and of the distant horizon"—until the nib of his quill pen breaks.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I show him my phone, which he says is magic, and explain the multiverse theory, which he says with a laugh is heresy. Then I tell him about my lonely culture, the doom to come. "Sometimes I wish I weren't alive, at least not in the 21st century," I say. He doesn't quite understand. As the starry scruff of the Milky Way brightens and an alligator bellows like a husky-voiced engine, the live oak slowly shapeshifts into my maple, our backs adjusting to the new, miraculous bark. Then a whippoorwill, flying over us toward a palmetto, drops a note from its beak: "Come home," my mother has written in her bubbly cursive, "I'm worried about you." But I'm too exhausted, and weirdly happy. William and I are, as he will later write, "lulled asleep by the mixed sounds of the wearied surf, lapsing on the hard beaten shore." As long as I can, I want to stay here, where anything is possible, where I'm held.