

THE PROCESSION

by Robert Pinsky

At the summit of Mauna Kea, an array of antennae
Sensitive to the colors of invisible light.

The antennae sidle heavily on motors to measure
Submillimeter waves across the cold universe,

In patterns choreographed by an astronomer's hand
At a computer in Massachusetts, in real time:

A system of waves and removes and extremes
Devoted to the wavering, remote nature of things.

Also, your soul. Your father Adam known as Vishnu
And Lakshmi your mother known also as Eve,

Both of them smaller than the width of a hair
Are riding astride matched tortoises along a road

Nine microns wide, following another Eve
And another Adam in a long procession

Of mothers and fathers, Lakshmis and Vishnus
With you their child Cain and their child Abel.

Innumerable their names and doings, innumerable
Their destinies and remote histories and tongues.

Somewhere among them your ancestor the slave
Also your ancestors the king the thief the stranger.

The immense agonies of my tiny span of life:
A pause as one tortoise in the chain lifts his foot

To tread the emanation of a dead star, still alive
And afire when the procession first set out.

Everyone alive the outcome of a rape,
Everyone alive the outcome of a great love.

Cain and Abel, Heloise and Abelard, mostly
Anonymous they travel a filament of light

To cross the Nothing between the galaxies
Into the pinhole iris of your mortal eye.

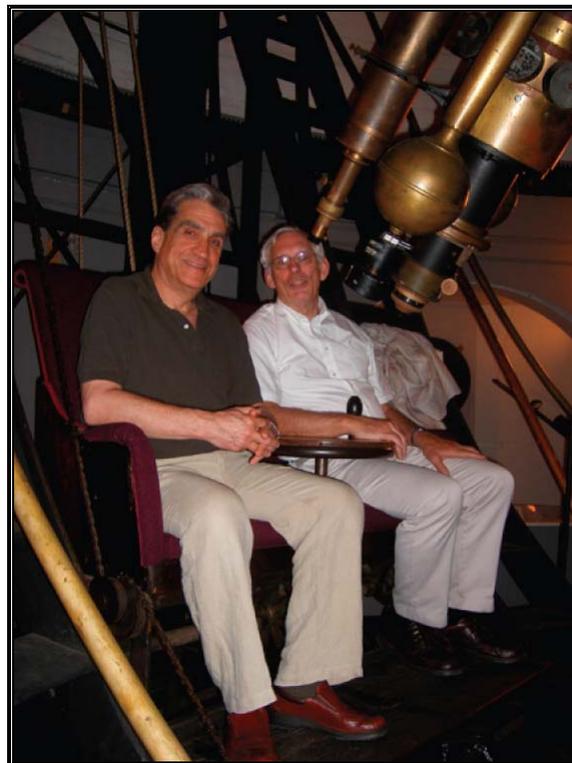
At the heart of each telescope on Mauna Kea,
An aperture finer than a hair on Vishnu's head.

On every hair on each Vishnu's head, a procession
Of tiny paired tortoises crossing a galactic distance.

In the skull of each tortoise in the long procession,
A faceted jewel attuned to a spectral channel

Where endlessly Kronos eats us his children, suffering
By nature each of us in a certain sliver of time.

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**ROBERT PINSKY AND JIM MORAN
OBSERVER'S SEAT OF HCO 16-INCH TELESCOPE**

Author's accompanying note:

The astronomer James Moran and his colleagues were adept at giving a rather ignorant outsider some sense of their intellectually exciting work with the Submillimeter Array of antennae. During that lucid explanation I also learned a striking, though incidental, fact about the Array: its components, eight large but mobile instruments atop the mountain Mauna Lea— wheel about to change their configuration, there in Hawaii, driven by the hand of someone at a computer in Massachusetts.

To a tourist of knowledge like me, those two degrees of distance —intergalactic and intercontinental, both mediated by invisible means of communication—suggested two orders of reality, one on warm earth and one in cold space. Massachusetts is remote from Hawaii, and both are remote from Aldebaran. But to say so teases or stretches the very concept of “remote.”

Like the celebrated short film made by Ray and Charles Eames, “Powers of Ten,” the Submillimeter Array discloses an intricate, enabling dance between the all-but-unthinkably large and the all-but-unthinkably small. That dance includes the processors and memory chips within the digital computer; it includes the motorized antennae with their twenty-foot reflectors as they waltz about funneling information into central receptors a micron or two wide. Also part of the dance is the hulking, forty-year old industrial machine tool that mills the precise, infinitesimal channels within those receptors. Above all, the dance includes invisible little waves that travel across the universe and across time. The kinds of mediation and remoteness, the orders of survival across distance, seemed as multiple, indeed infinite, as Hindu cosmology.

I was reminded of a cartoon I like: the full-page rectangle is filled mostly by a vast night sky studded with innumerable stars. Gazing up at that hyperbolic, heavenly display from one corner of the rectangle are two people. The caption: “It makes me realize how insignificant you are.”

This brilliant joke exposes a cliché by ambush and reversal. One aim of poetry is to touch the generative reality underlying truism or cliché: possibly to find, in apparent disproportions of scale, in the interpenetration of psyche and cosmos, some heartfelt apprehension of insignificance and significance.

— Robert Pinsky