I am searching for a piece of sky. Light blue, perhaps streaked with an infinitesimal whiteness. Out of other blues I seek the slightest indication of cloud—an almost unnoticeable subversion of platonic blueness. Two adjacent pegs, one slightly larger than the other. Rectangular. Right-angled. Stained in one corner by the intrusion of coniferous green.

My father has nearly completed the cottage. He looks for brick-colored pieces and the hint of a smoke-stained chimney. Together, we have a system. We consult the box, and our fingers color-coordinate, our minds order. All we are missing now is the expanse of empty air and a corner of green grass—the hardest parts. Once texture and color become identical, our previous system is obsolete. We move on to system B.

System B is far less efficient than color-coding—more guesswork and so slower progress. We begin by looking for oddly shaped pieces, the ones with bulging pegs that might fit into warped indents, the ones with curved rather than perpendicular corners. No longer do we fit one piece into the whole; we fit piece to piece to piece to whole. Slowly, the beige of our coffee table begins to disappear as we move closer toward the wholeness—toward completion. Then my father snaps the final instance of green into place.

Now he presses his palms against the top of the puzzle and carefully slides it off the table onto a large flat piece of cardboard. With an adroit twist of his wrists, he flips it upside down. For a split second, I feel the air in my lungs freeze. He could make a mistake, work too slowly, and the fragile arrangement of these pieces would shatter. In a single moment, hours of work would be undone. Colors would tumble down onto the carpet with profound abandon, seethe like quantum foam. But instead he lifts the cardboard and reveals a thousand pieces still perfectly interlocked: our cottage landscape turned upside down.

We grab pens and number the backs of each piece as they lie in place. My father moves horizontally in numbers as I label letters vertically. 4B. 5F. 2A.
When every piece has become part of our whole, we will place each one back into the box. We will put the cottage and the trees aside and perhaps never think of them again. We will sit down to dinner with the contentment of knowing that this particular puzzle has been solved forever. Anytime we wanted, we could put the image back together. We had a system.

On road trips to Houston, my father and I would play a game in the car. Like all of our games, he was teaching, and I was learning.

“Ask me a question,” he would say, and I would ask him what I thought were the grand mysteries of the universe. Why can birds fly? What makes people hungry? Why doesn’t it hurt when we cut our hair or nails? How do microwaves work?

“We get hungry because our stomach is empty, which sends signals to our brain, which tells us that we need food.”

“Why do we need food?”

“Because we need the nutrients in food to live.”

“Why?”

“Because our body doesn’t produce all the things that it needs to function, so we have to eat stuff to get those things.”

“Why?”

“Stop it, Michelle. Next question.”

Growing up, I assumed that my father had the answers to everything. He knew a language of polysyllabic ciphers that held the key to understanding all of life, and could tell by a glance at a putrid petri dish that the universe was this or that. Scientists and mathematicians wore the white robes of the elect and guarded an epistemological absolute: they understood all whys. I remember once looking through a picture book at the library filled with colorful drawings of human organs. My fingers traced the intestines—rendered in purple, folded in layers—and I read that they were nearly twenty-five feet long if fully extended. The brain was orange, also covered with wrinkles and folds. I thought that the brain seemed like a rounded lump of intestinal tissue. I wondered how much longer my father’s unraveled brain would be when compared to my own.

But then perhaps unraveling the brain is like unraveling a ball of yarn. I reach the end only to find that I’ve lost the beginning. In a tangled pile of string, we often give up on the singular strand. We resign ourselves to infinite loops.
Infinity fixates us a priori. As children we all sing the song that gets on everybody’s nerves; we all love to play the why game. At some point, perhaps we realize that a single questioning word is all it takes to elicit linguistic effusion—explanations and reasons that always have further explanations and reasons and so on. We don’t understand it, but we relish that power to demand of someone ad infinitum—that is, until we are told that it is insolence. My whys were simultaneously curious and full of cheek: I sincerely desired to know the reasons, but mostly I wanted to stump my father, to ask the final why that would leave him speechless and humbled like the rest of us, forced to admit that there was something he could not understand. I sought evidence to negate the conclusions of all those chess games we had played where he, untouched by casualties, would mercilessly destroy my army, order his pieces back into starting position, and kill my king with two measly pawns to prove a point. When he refused to play along with my infinite whys, I would jump up and down in my seat excitedly.

“HA!” I would then yell gleefully. “You don’t know!” to which he would indignantly cave and begin a heated tirade about essential amino acids and protein structures until I found myself piled high with words that were simply chaotic sounds. Then I would come to the inevitable conclusion: I was wrong and my father did know it all. Scientific rhetoric always won the argument.

I believed back then that the world was a series of questions and answers. Absolute knowledge of all things existed for those in the know, and life was the process by which one attempted to acquire this indisputable scientific model of comprehension. In sixth grade, I entered a science fair and stared down the rows of poster board as a single punctuation mark filtered forward through the cafeteria chaos. In glitter, in black block letters, in colorful paint, in construction paper cutouts—plastered on the makeshift booth of every experiment was a question. Is soda more acidic than vinegar? Does a certain plant grow in moist or dry conditions? How can you grow a crystal? Everywhere I looked, I saw questions and answers. I didn’t realize then that I never saw any whys.

Hypotheses to conclusions—for most of my life, the universe was simply a large-scale science fair, full of puzzles and solutions. My teacher would ask a question and I would raise my hand to offer the correct answer. There was always the correct answer and a series of incorrect ones, and that was life. When I sat leaning over my desk with my nose hovering a few inches above my notebook, the square root of 49 was never anything but seven, and you always said “I was,” not “I were.” There were rules, and then when one got old
enough there were exceptions, there were plus-minus signs and irrational numbers, but the exceptions could be catalogued and controlled by yet a larger and more complex system of regulations. 3.14 cascaded into forever but the new rules explained that two decimal places were more than sufficient. I found immense satisfaction in knowing the answers, as if the reservoir of facts that I was accumulating contained bits of an unfathomably large jigsaw puzzle that I would one day complete, flip upside down, and label according to a grid system. Information would snap into place like rungs of DNA.

“I think Michelle needs to stop raising her hand so much,” my elementary teacher once told my parents. “It doesn’t give other students a chance to figure things out if she just tells them.”

After that, my father told me to make sure I only answered one question every hour. We had a system.

Then there were the contradictions.

My mother discovered Christianity because of contradiction. She had always been a romantic visionary at heart, fascinated by deformity, chaos, and the signs of silent corruption in the natural world. It must have been difficult for her, marrying a scientist. When we moved to California, she discovered the egotistical sublime and became the perfect Romantic heroine. Together we spent days walking trails, discovering the landscape. She saw everything like Wordsworth saw his looming cliff. We’d come to the edge of some gorge, and she’d be struck by the power and beauty of nature. She was particularly fond of gnarled trees, their trunks twisted obscenely, their branches bent low to the ground as if some malignant force were burdening their barks with the disease of imperfection. This wildness, she would say, this imperfection is beauty.

Then she discovered that my unborn sister had only two heart chambers. She will never admit it, but I think now she finds imperfection even more beautiful, for it is tinged with a sort of horror that not even Burke could philosophize.

In middle school science class, our teacher asked us to ponder the universal aesthetic values for human facial features. Symmetry, he said, the eye always seeks mathematical perfection. Different features may vary in different cultures, but all humans find symmetry beautiful. Two eyes, a nose and mouth centered—split a human in half and you get two mirror images. Beauty is how identical the left side is to the right; the desire for a beautiful human is the desire to
I sit in art class and hot glue pasta onto a ten-centimeter square of construction paper. Two bowties lie parallel at diametrically opposite corners of the square. I prop two rigatoni pieces against the middle of each bowtie, add shells to the sides. Then I grid the sketch paper. One centimeter becomes three inches, and I trace the outline of the pasta shapes, enlarging them until a single bowtie is roughly the size of a textbook. Now I am breathing charcoal. I detail the instances of light, the deeper darks at the crease of the bowtie, the fingers of shadow spreading thinner. I shade, erase, and rub the paper until my outlines become three-dimensional, nearly edible. My eyes swallow reflections, refract, and an image impulses into existence in the visual cortex. My fingers smudge black powder.

Suddenly, I am aware of my art teacher standing behind me. She brings my drawing to the paper cutter and swiftly cuts eight inches from the left and fifteen from the bottom.

Symmetry is not composition, she says. Symmetry is just order. The eye finds mathematical perfection boring.

Einstein found mathematical perfection wondrous, lost sleep over inconsistencies. He discovered solace in his Cosmological Constant, and blindly hoped for a philosophically impeccable universe—static, spherical, without a single stitch unexplained. A lifetime of work became the slow ascent towards one goal: theoretical wholeness. He wanted to reconcile new discoveries with old knowledge, smooth out incongruities; he strained towards all-encompassing explanations and a comprehensive model of the universe. Relativity solved the problems of Newtonian physics, bridged the contradictory implications of electromagnetism and mechanics, and held profound explanatory power. Suddenly, the workings of the world must have seemed like they might just fit under one model—one model needing refinement and expansion for the exceptions to come, yet one attainable model of wholeness. Perhaps it was then, realizing that the human understanding of linear time was an illusion, that Einstein felt he had gotten close to finding the ends and unraveling life into a single strand. Perhaps he believed that he had nearly touched the outer edges of our closed world, and was just a few inches of dirt away from breaking through the surface, shooting into the void, and surveying the universe from the outside, as whole—a unified field.

Then objects in space were discovered discolored, tinted a red that broke the ease of stasis, spelled rapid acceleration with no end. Then came the
threat of an uncertainty principle to shatter his illusions of order and completion, of finite space and closed models. Relativity was incompatible with quantum mechanics. Human logic demanded that one be correct and the other incorrect, and the universe refused to comply. Einstein solved one contradiction only for a greater one to arise: the laws of order that governed a world of stars and galaxies refused to coexist alongside the laws of minute particles. Life was an opposition between the unfathomably small and the unfathomably large. What, then, can we make of the black hole: both negative and positive infinity?

Contradiction is not an exception; it is a rule. Camus had told me long ago that I would come to a crossroads that split into faith and suicide—between a leap towards religion and the end of all things. Stay, he urged, “examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions” (*Sisyphus* 10). Life should be lived at this fork where the human discovers no grand order to his condition, no system of meaning. Four years ago, I closed the book and decided that Camus did not understand humanity. One does not simply abolish hope for meaning, for order, for an all-encompassing system of explanations, of whys. Such hope may be the cause of human discontent, but it is inextricably linked to consciousness. I felt that Camus was profoundly wrong and put *Sisyphus* aside, and yet for a long time the image of “odd vegetation” has lingered with me.

Perhaps I am tainted by a recollection of Meursault’s beach, but I imagine this crossroads as a reddish landscape, flat and swirling with coppered dust. The vegetation is indeed strange, full of disorder, imperfections, both beautiful and ugly. I see frenzy and tranquility in this vegetation, malice and benevolence, anger and joy. I see a union of opposites refusing to cooperate in a closed system of human logic and yet seamlessly fused together—an intricate order of chaos. Contradiction itself is the manifest system, contradiction and a seeming disorder that locks piece by piece into a hint of the inscrutable logic of the universe. Observation of this meaninglessness implies a meaning, a faith. Einstein may have been correct to believe that God does not play dice, yet he never considered this perfection of contradictions as ultimate order, and died dissatisfied.

I read Brian Greene and wonder why scientists speak so often of elegance, what aesthetics have to do with fundamental equations. Proponents of string theory marvel at the elegance of its simplistic premise: a world of infinite loops and vibrations—a mere rejection of point-particles, and suddenly
Einstein and Heisenberg are reconciled. Again there is the temptation to believe in an all-encompassing theory. We strive toward completion and cling to potential resolution. We find immense satisfaction in the wholeness of theoretical models, in snapping seemingly disparate empirical evidence into a system of relational links. Unification is a human aspiration, to transcend the unknown and arrange information into an explanatory model that justifies all occurrences. Our minds want to order, to complete, to resolve enigmas and shine light into the outer reaches of our limited understanding. We want to unveil mysteries, discover a system rooted in a human rationalism that we comprehend, and use it to answer all whys. Yet the more order we seem to discover, the more complex the contradictions. Beneath the façade of knowledge lurks irresolvable chaos. I think that Babel must have seemed the pinnacle of elegance to those who laid its stones.

And then it crumbled into a confusion that brought both despair and the implication of God.

When I go home, I can usually hear my mother pray. At first it felt a bit incongruous, the lexicon of Western religion in Chinese, but eventually the novelty faded. Sometimes, I think she prays out loud and hopes that I overhear her—a subconscious guilt trip. Let Michelle give up worldly knowledge, she says, free her from the critical mind.

My mother’s God makes sense; he requires defense against atheist attacks. Any contradiction is resolvable through the Bible, through a verse that justifies. Recited words are how she formulates a defense against my father’s logic. We sit in church and my father whispers—a bit too loudly—that Abraham only lived to 175 because the annals of human history begin after his death, begin when all the biblical characters conveniently started to live to plausible ages. He scoffs at the story of Lazarus, disagrees with the parable of the talents. My father’s God is subject to the judgment of science, to the laws of physics, to pragmatism.

“Would you say that jealousy is a sin?”

“Yes, of course. God wants us to live in love, not negativity.”

“And yet in Exodus, Jehovah states multiple times that he is a jealous God.”

My mother pauses, and thinks for a moment before turning back to my father.

“Jealous is probably being used in a different way there. The point is that we should worship only one God, not that he is jealous.”
“That doesn’t make sense. It’s the same word, in the English translation as well. It means jealous. God doesn’t want us to be jealous, he is perfect, jealousy is imperfect, and God has just stated that he is jealous. From what I gather he’s also easy to anger and condones Moses’s slaughter of Israelites who have turned from him. He thinks it’s okay to ask Abraham to kill his son, and to wipe out everyone with a flood. Your God is petulant, violent, and incredibly self-centered.”

I do not go to church, and I do not pray. I feel no need to be baptized, and I do not care for personal gods. And so my mother thinks that I am like my father, who cannot believe because the contradictions in the Bible are myriad and plenty. For my mother, these contradictions would be answerable if she cared to consult theology. Pastors and religious scholars understand the whys, can explain with eloquence the subtle differences between “Jehovah is a jealous God” and “do not be jealous.” She tells me not to mind contradictions, tells me that they will all make sense in due time when I find the gift of faith. And so she cannot understand that contradictions are the root of my faith.

Kierkegaard first assured me that God did not make sense; he invited me to suspend human logic, and I found it wondrous. Abraham would never be explainable, never understood, and that was what made him the father of faith. All of a sudden, I found the Old Testament fascinating, resonant despite the fact that I was neither Christian nor Jewish. My atheist friends have trouble understanding my love for religious texts, my adamant rejection of their scientific attacks upon theology. Why do you care, they ask, you’re not even religious. But I find theology beautiful because it embraces contradiction so whole-heartedly. The hint of a higher order that governs a system of contradictions can only be described by contradiction itself. God is both one and three, both father and son: beginning and end, yet without either. Aristotle called him the immovable mover—an incalculable force.

Calculations that merge the equations of general relativity and those of quantum mechanics typically yield one and the same ridiculous answer: infinity. . . . An infinite answer is nature’s way of telling us that we are doing something wrong.

Or perhaps an infinite answer is nature’s way of telling us the truth.

I am watching the silken fabric unfurl across the stage—rose-colored, weightless, billowing from front to back. The ground is littered with petals, and Cho-Cho San sings of smelling spring. Her movements mimic the fluid-
ity of the silk, and her voice radiates immense joy. In this moment, she has discovered a hope renewed: her husband is coming home. I watch her prepare a space to welcome her beloved Pinkerton, convert the stage into a magnificent vision of beauty, love, hope, and matrimonial bliss. She reaches her hands towards the sky, and sings to the vessel sailing towards Japan—and the languorous dance between notes paralyzes me. Her song evokes that same immense joy, but that joy simultaneously exacerbates my feeling of dread. By the end of the night, I know, she will be dead.

And now I watch the events unfold, beautifully, gliding from edges to edges with diminishing hope, rejoicing, lamentations, and Sorrow manifest within a small child. I am filled with awe and sadness, with a sense of beauty and trepidation. I sit, silent and fixed in place by the profound beauty I am witnessing. I do not move, but the entirety of my being trills with the vibrations of infinite strings.

—Brian Greene 129.

**WORKS CITED**


