

The New Criterion

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Observer

by Robert Pack

*Only a universe with an initial density exactly equal to critical density would be capable both of engendering motherly stars and of lasting long enough to provide a home for the nuclear, chemical, and biological reactions required for life to subsist. . . . This "fertile" density is the first condition any universe must meet before it can hope to produce its own observer. —Hubert Reeves, *The Hour of Our Delight**

Muse of the universe,
muse of mass-energy, I'd never known
critical density
is a conception that I need
to take personally—

the speed required right at the start
for fiery particles to be propelled
without collapsing back because
the pull of gravity
could halt expansion and prevent the laws

that govern entropy and cooling
from engendering enduring stars.

Through improvising time,
mothering stars could then provide us
with a place where melody and rhyme,

in turn, would be conceived from
nuclear and chemical reactions,
from organic ooze.

I'd never known that metaphor
also required mothering, so that deep blues

can represent our gloom,
green can convey renewal, red evoke desire,
and white betoken emptiness
or innocence because initial particles
designed us to express

what our initiating species has become —
observers of the patient stars
that mothered us to bear
true witness to the story of the past
unfolding everywhere,

enabling us to apprehend the music
of the whirling planets
as they orbited the sun,
enabling us to feel the harmony
fertile density had begun.

So here we are, observing with our eyes
the slant light through the pines
before the orange sun descends
behind the bluish-purple misted hills;
and here we are as moonlight sends

fresh flashings through the lake
and multiplies the silvery reflections
while they slide and spill
and merge with our own thoughts,
which cast their own reflecting light at will

as if the act of looking
added hue and aura to the night;
and here we are at dawn, here's why we came,
observing with our ears
the way the whip-poor-will repeats his name,

hearing the pulse of words
we have evolved to listen with,
observing with the mind
the mind's brave observations of itself,
enabling us to find

thought can engender from its own
critical density
a fertile universe through which to roam,
which metaphor, in blue or green
or red or white, can designate as home.

—*Robert Pack*

Bio

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