

The
Behaviour of Clocks

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CONTENTS

Preface	x
Acknowledgments	x
<i>A Theory of Relativity</i>	x

ONE

<i>A ship is a piece of floating space</i>	x
<i>Airport Malpensa, Milan</i>	x
<i>When We Were in Italy</i>	x
<i>The Road to Chualar</i>	x
<i>Some Birth Day</i>	x
<i>Family Album, I</i>	x
<i>Via Sacra</i>	x
<i>Side Trip</i>	x
<i>Gratitude</i>	x
<i>Jet Lag</i>	x

<i>Telling Time</i>	x
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TWO

<i>Sunday, Leivi</i>	x
<i>Clocks Without Faces</i>	x
<i>Finding Time I</i>	x
<i>My planet is making me dizzy</i>	x
<i>In the Rain, Udine</i>	x
<i>No Map</i>	x
<i>Venezia on the Water, Rising</i>	x
<i>Einstein's Violin</i>	x
<i>After the Statues</i>	x
<i>Leonardo's Lost Robot</i>	x
<i>In the Anatomical Museum</i>	x
<i>Soil Gives Way; Rock Insists</i>	x

<i>What I Didn't See That Day</i>	x
<i>Lost In</i>	x
<i>To Give, To Get</i>	x
<i>Souvenir</i>	x

<i>Time, Travels</i>	x
--------------------------------	---

THREE

<i>Attention, Please</i>	x
<i>Waves, Cinque Terra</i>	x
<i>I think of Eugene</i>	x
<i>"Hai?" . . do you have?</i>	x
<i>Family Album, III</i>	x
<i>Perdu Sol</i>	x
<i>Finding Time II</i>	x
<i>Change of Seasons</i>	x
<i>Degrees of Separation</i>	x
<i>Finding Time III</i>	x
<i>"The Book of the Elements of Machines"</i>	x

<i>Einstein's Violin, 2</i>	x
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FOUR

<i>And Counting</i>	x
<i>Eclipse at Solstice</i>	x
<i>The Age of Information</i>	x
<i>Revolutions</i>	x
<i>I have no proof that Lisbon exists</i>	x
<i>Faraway Home</i>	x
<i>Family Album, IV</i>	x
<i>We're Traveling</i>	x
<i>Home</i>	x
<i>Follow the tail lights</i>	x
<i>How to Wind a Watch</i>	x

<i>About the Author</i>	x
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A Theory of Relativity

I stand at the window of a railway carriage
—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Across from me on a train Albert sat facing backwards, a little table between us, his forehead pressed against the glass. His eyes flickered as if to count passing fence posts. At length he reached a small notebook from a chest pocket, placed it on the table, jotted something down. I tried not to stare, but couldn't make out what he wrote even when I did. He smiled. *May I trade seats with you for a while, my dear?* What could I say? In spite of my motion sickness, I agreed. For one thing, the train travelled a relatively straight path, plus his eyes were so kind and sad. He steadied my elbow until I was seated, took his seat, turned again to the window, again to his notes. Then I watched, as he had, the landscape recede, what I knew blurred in immeasurable distance. The sky lost light, Albert's white head bobbed, and just before I slept a luminescent clock appeared in the sky though now I see it was the moon itself wearing a clock face that watched us speed by, or did we too appear to be standing completely still?

ONE

A Ship is a Piece of Floating Space

—MICHEL FOCAULT

You travel by airship—a jet—a placeless place at once threshold and destination, neither here nor yet there. You fly, translated to a café table set on uneasy cobble under some broad-leafed tree, the days turning to memories you will call “Portugal,” or “Italy,” or “that summer when.” You navigate by train schedule, guidebook, by the sidewalk underfoot, and think you could stay. Traveling itself a placeless place you begin to feel at home in. You learn to move slow in the afternoons, how to count change, how to say “I don’t speak. . .”

Translation, the movement of meaning from one language to another, connects thought to voice, a floating space between people. Time, memory, meaning—these spaces by which you travel.

Airport Malpensa, Milan

In flight the late day gleams red, attendants pass out eye masks, pull window shades closed, turn off lights. Call it night. It isn't any hour but a place hurtling over land then water, across clouds and star, the misted window, out of day through night and day again while no time passes but we pass through, rushed to a future that frames a tilted *now*. The stem of my watch falls off, disappears somewhere under my feet. No one meets us. We get our luggage, our passports stamped, trudge outside to the line of busses waiting in the dark of the next moment already falling forward.

We Were in Italy

When we drove across the country, past the fields, past the paper forests. When we noticed every village was marked by a steeple. When we mourned each farmhouse tumbled into the cave of itself. When we knew none could be restored. The sun said this plainly, its words a glossary of tomorrows it will not be turned back from. Oats drying in a field. Everywhere a chance to forget. And one evening from a hillside after dinner, lightning bugs flicker in an olive orchard. No shooting star, but the wine is very good.

The Road to Chualar

I testify to what I saw—something aglint in the distance. A wink. Maybe miracles at work like new houses or springs of water fountaining forth, the adobe furrows rinsed wet and black. To the west, the mountains' dark margin held it in, held them back—fields of gold, a bird turning on silvered wings—*did not our hearts burn within us?* Shadows fell between the mountains' knees and what could ignite did, just like that, spent vines ablaze, the sky forgotten. Stands of poplars too offered a type of forgiveness to incurious cows. People bowed low among lettuces. It was over in an instant. The CD ended, the road pulled away so I wouldn't see the shining dim or night veil what I had seen, what burns within.

Some Birth Day

Because my soul, open like a tin can under heaven, caught
lost light refracted from a planet or star I never saw but felt
illuminate my empty core, the dark matter of fact, and like a
can once opened can never be resealed, this became my because,
the thin curved metal of my remaining days, the lid-off-
mouth-open-catch-all-that-can-be mystery of moment rolled
under aluminum stars, a comet's glance, the knife blade moon
slicing, sliding, o moon. And you sun, bleached memories of
wakefulnesses flickering empty as a can, complete as a can can
be opened, open empty under heaven, matter's dark fact and the
seasons, turning.

Family Album, I

* * *

A snowstorm, rural Tennessee, 1919. Grandmother goes into labor at home two months early. The doctor sets the baby aside; how can it live. The midwife, a cousin, swaddles my dad and lays him in a box surrounded by flannel-wrapped canning jars she's filled with warm water.

* * *

As a baby Dad never crawls but scoots on his bottom. Grandma S. sews one of Grandpa's old banjo heads to the seat of his britches to keep them from wearing out.

* * *

Dad's family is seventh generation Methodist, which means since Creation. The family, Tennessee farmers, supported the Confederates. Dad finds mini balls, bullets, a cannonball, and Civil War uniform buttons, both sides, in the fields where he plays.

* * *

Via Sacra

A pilgrim's journey up a worn cobbled path twists through trees and centuries, polished by faithful feet: the penitents, the grateful ones, those who sought particular mercy, some deliverance from pain. Dioramas stand along the way, life-size, Christ's passion recreated, a donation-only coin box, figures viewed through glass. Press a button for illumination. Light falls across veined marble—the shadows of suffering resume.

I continue walking, peering in windows, hoping. I want something to move.

Side Trip

We hike to a hilltop above the Collio outside Villa Russiz up a tractor path that steers through the vineyards, dusty, hot, steep, glad for walking shoes and the breeze that blows cool off the Adriatic, off the Alps. The two winds meet here, a local says. A domed mausoleum stands silent among a crown of cypress and pine that bends and murmurs like the oldest story. We are quieted and see the lay of the land we've come to, a countryside whose bloody battles lie healing beneath vineyards, an occasional stone farmhouse, the spire of some village. It's as if we'd traveled by horseback or by memory. By the scent of the earth. We nap there under the rocking branches. We watch the sky.

But life is a busy thing, each ant, a fly buzzing near. A leaf that turns. Words that won't fill my mouth, my mouth full of emptiness like wind pressed against blades of grass. The man who brought us there sits up. Time is short, he says, time is beautiful. Our son appears then among the grapevines. One row plowed, one left to weeds.

Gratitude

The woman woke from her nap. A breeze tossed through the greeny branches overhead. Some bird wheedled in a way that matched the motion of the wind, the leaves. A stem of grass teased her bare ankle. The dry air buzzed. In one direction vineyard unfurled, rising, falling with the hills. In the other the steeple and tiled roofs of some small town stood almost asleep. She didn't want to move either. It was good that dinosaurs were extinct. They would have ruined everything.

Jet Lag

Now my canoe glides across a small lagoon. I trail my fingers and watch the ripples fan out behind the boat as long as I can. Already the twists and turns of the journey recede, and the canoe noses toward shore. I don't want to get out. When I look down at the water, a face searching in a wavery mirror peers back. The bow runs aground on the sandy bottom but I pretend to sleep. My name is called. I answer "I'm sleeping" though nothing comes out of my mouth.