



I am a spectator more than the author of this story. The words came out as a mix of conversation and inspiration, roiling my brain as if the pencil guided my hand on the paper.

I heard the words and watched my hand write them, but I did not create them; they just were.

The story told itself.

I had never authored anything by hand with a pencil, so the experience was something new. But this is the tale as it came out, unaltered, unedited, and inexplicable.

And most curiously, not in my indecipherable scribbles. It was more like the beautiful writing of a different age—my hand, but not my handwriting.

As Old as Time...

This history begins a long time ago. It was not a dark and stormy night but a tumultuous time on this planet we call home. For a fleeting moment, among all the other moments in time—for existence is a series of moments—the essence of what we all are, atoms, molecules, and evolution merged into a tree.

The serendipity of the universe.

It would be unlike any tree those living today would recognize, but it was a tree. Some of these trees would survive as individuals for 5000 years, while others didn't make it past the first few moments of sprouting; my lineage in this form fell somewhere in the middle.

The wood surrounding the graphite within came from the descendants of that ancient cedar.

From this vantage point, we watched as species came and went, lived and died, evolved, and faced extinction. And we had a front-row seat to it all because we were its essence, the *je ne sais quoi* of its existence.

You might ask why we picked you. Serendipity again. Many people go through life never noticing the things they encounter by chance. You did the first time you saw me lying against the curb in the rain. You looked but didn't see and passed by.

Then, when we tried again in the desert, you embraced the moment. There have been others, but you now have this pencil in your hand, this is your moment.

Perhaps, at another time, your essence told me the story, but it doesn't matter.

To put a time on it, we have always been. We had no beginning; any end is just another beginning.

Over eons, we moved from one form to another. We could have used another form but chose to put it into a familiar context.

"I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree."

Everyone loves trees.

The world was teeming with life, most of it unfamiliar and alien. Few recognizable species survive, including the horseshoe crab, alligator, and Galapagos Tortoises. And cockroaches. You can't kill cockroaches! Adaptability is the golden rule of evolving; they are masters of it.

If cockroaches ever become interested in sentience, they will overrun the universe (they abhor it, as do most species). Sentience is an ongoing evolutionary experiment.

But back to our tale. We watched it all unfold.

How is this possible? That is the point of this story.

We are all connected. We are a varied combination of atoms bonded by forces into molecules and powered by electromagnetism.

I know the next question: a pencil can't be alive, can it?

Who's writing this story? Is this all a figment of your imagination, a dream caused by indigestion or exhaustion? Or is the 'inanimate' object in your hands, the one made of the same elements as you, telling you a tale?

No answer, eh?

Once again, it is because you don't comprehend what is right before your eyes. You are not alone; most don't see what is right before their eyes. They gaze, but they do not see.

If you weren't limited to the visible spectrum, the range of human vision, you might view a different picture. It goes to the arrogance of humans that only light they can see is meaningful.

It is not.

The light reflecting off the pencil in your hand or the person you met for lunch a few days ago conveys limited information. The spectrum of electromagnetic radiation includes radio waves, microwaves, infrared, visible, and ultraviolet radiation, as well as X-rays and gamma rays. These are all forms of light waves; you just can't see them.

Your evolutionary limitation blocks the majority of light in the universe.

Your eyes send the light to the brain, interpreting the image as a pencil or a human. The eyes tell you what is unique about the object, what differentiates a pencil from a bowling ball or a stranger from a friend.

You do not see the consistency of the atoms within each: shared carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, and other elements of various names. Thus, a need for this tale and someone to share it.

*"We are stardust, we are golden
We are billion-year-old carbon..."*

I heard the song Woodstock from Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young echoing along as I watched the tale unfold on the paper.

I can sense you are confused by your hesitancy and resistance in writing the words. It happens whenever we confront the reality of this universe. Being interconnected at the most elemental level to everything—the desk you're sitting at, a prehistoric bone from a long-dead dinosaur, your grandmother, a neutron star millions of light years away—can be disconcerting to the limited reality of most.

Fear not. It will all make sense soon enough. Embrace what these words say as we write them. The truth will show itself.

Matter and energy cannot be destroyed, which is the one universal reality. Matter and energy remain conserved. The elements within you and the pencil in your hand have always existed. They existed before you or your species ever evolved in the universe.

They will continue long after you are gone.

Why are you telling me this?

So, you'll tell others...

I can ask questions?

We would expect a few.

So, life after death is possible?

Ah, the proverbial biggie. It depends on what you mean by life. If you mean life in general, there will be more living things after you die. Some will be new species, and others will be those who've come to understand the evolutionary process.

I mean, after my death, will I remember this life? The words stopped. The "silence" seemed out of place from what was happening a moment ago. Then they resumed.

How about we write more, then decide for yourself?

My turn to be silent.

Have you ever looked up at the stars and wondered what or who was out there? Most people never do. They never explore beyond what is before them. They make no effort to understand or appreciate it.

Let me illustrate the point.

The elements inside you—the ones that make you, you—have always existed. It will make more sense if you accept that matter and energy go from one form to another.

Thus, the carbon in your system could once have been Galileo's eyelash when he first looked at Jupiter's moons.

The oxygen you breathed in might once have inflated the lungs of Aristotle or Plato.

The nitrogen in you may once have provided the nutrient for a crop grown along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers at the dawn of the age of farming.

The hydrogen in your blood may once have exploded in a flare from a distant star in the Andromeda Galaxy.

Every atom in you once was part of something else—every single one.

If you consider an atom now part of your synaptic system arrived here on Earth from the dust of a comet or the collision of a meteor, then we are all children of the universe.

But what difference does it make if I can't know where it came from or remember this life?

Ah, but you know. You have the ability to understand it all. Remember what I said: matter cannot be destroyed. Everything within you was once part of something else, and it conserves that information. It is there for those who understand and for those who open their eyes.

And when this form you inhabit follows the natural course of this version of life, all those elements will migrate to another form. They will dissipate across a universe filled with elements like those creating you.

The atoms in your hand now writing this story may someday reappear in the hand of a cellist in a symphony orchestra or the cello itself.

The molecules of your eyes may one day be part of the brain of a doctor who finds the root causes of cancer.

What once were the bones in your fingers may become the feathers of an hawk flying high in the sky over the mountains.

Atoms from you and your worst enemy may combine to become a new creature.

Or you may end up as a pencil whose purpose is to continue to tell the story of our interconnectedness.

But I will know none of this. I'll be dead.

Have you not been listening? You cannot destroy matter and energy. This is why we are telling you this story. You will be changed into something else, as you were transformed from whatever the elements within you were before.

You are matter and energy. The form may change, but existence does not end.

At that moment, the light flickered on. Here, I believed that when my life ended, everything ended, when the reality was nothing ended. The essence that is me, that is us all, persists.

A pencil was telling me a story. A pencil was sending the history of all it has been—of what the universe is—through my hands onto paper. It told me a story of the infinity of the elements of the universe, and I was part of it.

I have always been part of it, and I will always be part of it. We all are. We are indeed stardust. But I still didn't understand. So, I asked, what about memories?

Ah, yes. They are the things sentient beings use to give meaning to their existence. What they have experienced, who they have known, and where they have been all combined to guide them each day.

They mix joy and sorrow, pride and disappointment, triumph and loss.

However, these remembrances are limited to the current form. You remember maturing into your current state. In another form, you might recall your first glimpse of the sun as you sprouted from the earth or the first sense of the giant nebula you passed as an interstellar traveler within a rock, once part of an exploded planet.

Memories are essential, but particular to the form that creates them. Remember, they do not just disappear when the form changes. Everything about existence is energy and matter.

But I will no longer be me when I die?

You will *be*. You will always *be*. It will just take on another form. Consider this: when you feel the sun's warmth on your back, the photons have traveled millions of miles to land on you. The heat is exchanged, and your skin warms.

The next day, the same thing happens. The photons that warmed you yesterday may now be at the solar system's outer limits, bound to other particles. The ones that warm you today may have roiled on the sun's subsurface while dinosaurs roamed this planet before their expulsion sent them on a collision course with you.

Existence continues. Life persists. Matter and energy are conserved.

I need a moment.

The writing stopped, and the "voice" fell silent, but my mind still roiled. What of all the ideas of religions or the dualism of the mind/brain? Isn't there something more than matter and energy?

I've always believed some of me would survive death, not as a spirit who returns to intercede in others' lives, but as an entity with a continued existence. And the words resumed.

Why do you cling to the myth of duality? Once you accept you are part of the universe today, you will be a part of the universe in the future, and you came from being part of the universe in the past. The fallacy of dualism is evident.

You will *always* be!

I could feel my hand pressing harder on the paper, underlining the words.

Have you ever seen a baby look at itself in the mirror? It is a mixture of familiarity and discovery. Because an infant has no preconceived notion of life or death—nor a collection of memories to rely on—they do not consider the past or the future,

All they see is what is in front of them. They spend their first few moments discovering what form they now occupy. They accept what is without questioning why. There is an innate acquiescence to their present reality.

As they develop, the evolutionary path set in their brain appears, and they create a sense of self. The questions follow: How am I here? Why am I here? What happens after I'm gone?

The answers they get from those around them amplify the continuity of misunderstanding. Sentience and intelligence sometimes excel at delusion and conceit.

Religion, cultural behavior, and conversations with those close to them reinforce the misconception that they are superior to other forms of "life." They differentiate living things from other entities through an artificial definition of existence.

This focus on those like themselves closes their eyes to reality. Those few who consider the possibilities of existence as something other than their form are rare. A few understand the reality of continuity and the connectedness of all matter.

We do not need to reach out to them; they are already on the path to understanding.

For the rest, we need to tell this story. To help them get beyond the yearning for the past and dread of the future.

Focusing on the inevitability of death is incapacitating if one does not understand it is not the finality of existence. Trying to undo the past is paralyzing. Learning to live in the moment, to recognize the interconnectedness with all creatures and objects in the universe, is liberating.

And what about what Shelley wrote of Ozymandias?

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.

Look on my Work, ye Mighty, and Despair.

Is this not our fate? Are we not forgotten in but a few generations?

Maybe the atoms in your brain once were part of Ozymandias. Or Shelley? Perhaps you wrote those words or ruled a kingdom. This is the whole point. The ripples of existence travel in ways you cannot fathom without understanding this tale.

I have another question.

Please.

How can you tell this story from memories of your past existence? How is it you remember?

I see you're starting to understand. Matter and energy exist in one form or another and are never destroyed. Let's call it life essence; although life is a bit of a misnomer, it conveys a recognizable concept.

As you, or any other conglomeration of life essence, move through various forms of existence, the ability to remain connected to all that came before lurks just below the surface. They are not memories, per se; they are a continuity of connectedness to what came before and what will be.

You can see the future?

It is not quite that simple. Your limited perspective in your present form closes your eyes to the bigger picture. I see the future, but not in any sense you would recognize.

I am the future, the present, and the past.

The life essence that is me today, in this form in your hand, was once a tree 150 million years ago. I was once a feather of an eagle soaring over mountains in this land known as the United States before any humans roamed the land.

I was once a tiny piece of a crystalline diamond on a comet orbiting a star millions of light years from here.

I was all of these things and will take on other forms in the future. I will tell this story on a planet near Alpha Centauri, sharing it with a small child sitting on my knee two hundred years from now or on a space vessel sailing between galaxies centuries later.

I will always be, and so will you.

The words gave me pause. I tried to absorb the idea of continuity, but it seemed more like a dream than reality. I had no memories of past existence. I felt no connection to other elements.

How could this be?

What about the question you've never asked, and I know you want to?

I came out of my reverie and examined the pencil before me. It seemed to disappear for a moment, and I saw images of worlds and people flashing in and out of view. Like a montage of history covering millennia, it ran at light speed in my mind.

What is your name? I blurted out the question without realizing it. It hadn't occurred to me to ask it. But there it was.

I have many names, but I know myself only by one, truth.

Truth?

I am truth come to tell you a tale. I have often shared this tale with others, and they have shared it. We will spread the truth to illuminate the darkness of illusion and self-deception.

How can there be many names for truth?

My, my, you are understanding. There is only one truth, but many perspectives color it. What one might see as true can seem to be false to another. Myths, legends, and faiths arise from some truth and are trampled by those who do not understand their interconnectedness to everything else.

Humans tend to consider themselves the apex of existence. They create elaborate "truths" to justify these beliefs. They use them to oppress others, even their fellow humans, in pursuit of this idea.

This is why I tell my tale, tell *our* tale. Because what you are today is not what you were or will become.

Until we all understand this, the tragedies plaguing so many forms of existence will never stop.

But if we are all connected, how is it one element of you hasn't joined with others who don't understand and educate them? If we have always existed, how have some of us not learned this?

The words went silent once again. I waited, but nothing happened. Was I waking from this dream? Was this a figment of imagination now rising back to consciousness? I wanted to understand and continue the conversation, but I saw a blank void where the words ended.

The pencil sat on my desk against the paper for two weeks, silent and inanimate. The tale was unfinished, and I was left to my thoughts.

Then, one morning, as I woke from sleep, I glanced at my desk, and the pencil was no longer there. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up, trying to clear my head. I hadn't moved it. Where had it gone?

I slid out from under the covers and walked to the desk. On the paper were words I had not written. A few short lines in a now familiar handwriting looked up at me from the end of the page.

Remember this, my friend: the truth is never what we want it to be or what we'd like it to be. It just is. One day, what we have shared will make sense to you. A moment when it will all seem so simple. And you will have innumerable moments when you share this tale with others. You will see the truth, you will live the truth, you will be the truth.