

Goodbye World (A Lost Fragment)

by [James Como](#) (February 2019)



“Granularity, indeterminacy, relationality. These are the fundamental laws of the universe. A quantum of space is a billion billion times smaller than the smallest of atomic nuclei, and there space remains finitely granular with forces and locations indeterminate and relational.”

“How small, professor?” A woman, older than the other students. She had not bothered to raise a hand, the sort of “indeterminacy” this professor welcomed.

The class of two hundred, comfortable in a raked auditorium, always welcomed anything this classmate had to say. She was smart and fearless, and beautiful, that rare person who invited admiration instead of envy. Only one student, a plain girl seated high against the back wall in the far corner, seemed unmoved.

“A Planck Length. Approximately one millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a centimeter, that’s”—the man turned to the blackboard and wrote “ 10^{-33} centimeters.”

“But we do not live in that world.” This time a young man, perhaps twenty. He routinely omitted any honorific, a living argument.

The professor answered, "the apparent determinism of the macroscopic world—the solidity, so to speak, of our world—is due only to the fact that the randomness at the quantum level cancels out fluctuations, leaving differences too minute for us to experience in daily life. The mathematics is probabilistic—the dynamic is random."

"*'Cancels out on average'*" the young man quoted, as though pondering. He had been watching the professor.

"Yes, and that's all we know. Entropy is missing information, and it increases, because information can only decrease. Everything is information; for example, a black hole is missing information."

"So." The young man walked to the aisle as he spoke. "Your only certainty is randomness. There lies your faith."

The professor was an aging little man hardened by too many lecture halls, committee meetings, memos, syllabi, evaluations, letters recommending nondescript students, unfit chairmen, officious deans, and colleagues with no imagination.

Looking down he said, "the same granular structure characterizing the other quantum fields also characterizes the quantum gravitational field, and therefore space as well. The central prediction of loop theory is therefore that space is not a continuum, it is not divisible ad infinitum, it is formed of atoms of space, infinitesimally small."

The young man had listened. As he got to the aisle, but before turning to walk up and out, he said, "but it—the very bottom of things—remains *random*."

The woman stood, turned to the young man, and, while pointing at him with an outstretched arm, nearly shouted, "unlike rudeness, which cancels out—on average! Maybe, professor, on our macroscopic level, randomness makes some things *stand* out." She was looking at the young man.

"Maybe." He stuffed his books and papers into his floppy leather bag and left the lectern. Before stepping out of the lecture hall, without turning, he said, "dismissed."

But he was frozen in mid-stride by the young man, who had not yet left.

"And what if random randomness one day fails to balance, just randomly, you know? What if your great god randomness, that just *happens* to balance things out, is yet another instrument, another one of those oh-so-finely tuned numbers that keep the machinery running, and one day is just a bit—*just a bit*—off?"

The professor turned, looked up, and said, calmly, "then it's goodbye world."

He shuffled out. Students left in a scuffle. The young man high up the stairs, and the woman, standing at her seat in the middle of the room, stayed in place, staring at each other, until he too turned and left. She sat back down, her hands folded and her eyes closed. She seemed to be muttering, her face almost glowing. She looked like a saint at prayer. The plain girl watched.

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Two days later a number of strange events occurred. A tsunami struck Newfoundland, jihadists killed two hundred and twelve people in Uruguay, a raging blaze broke out in Chechnya covering seven hundred square miles, the Flatiron building in Manhattan collapsed at 3am, killing twenty (two eyewitnesses unknown to each other insisting that bricks had flown sideways and floated), and King Harald of Norway was badly wounded in an assassination attempt. Strangest of all, no one could say at precisely what time any of these events happened: time-keeping devices had either stopped, gone backwards, or raced forward. They *seemed* to have occurred simultaneously. Scientists called it all an "atmospheric magnetic phenomenon," or AMP, the recognizable anagram giving a terrified population the impression that the effect was familiar ("oh, *amps*, of course") and that they understood it. The press blamed the American president and global warming.

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That night, cuddling with her be-robed girlfriend, the beautiful woman said, "so Mab. What do you make of it?"

Mab, ten years older, cooed, “you’re the brain, Estelle. I got my fashion sense and mores from *Sex in the City*, my philosophy from Madonna, my morals from the Clintons. My politics I get from late-night tv talk shows. Tits from doctor Mahoska. When I’m not sleeping with you, I’m fucking married men.”

“We’ve spoken and he annoys me. Too much thought. Too much principle. He sees through things. I mentioned ‘misogyny,’ he said, ‘well, what about virophobia?’ He turns things around. When I referred to homophobia he said, ‘a natural reaction to homophilia.’ You see? He’s inventing shit we’ve never heard of. And he’s direct. He was ruthless with the professor. Like a religious nut job, but reasonable. *That’s* unsettling.”

“Honey, he’s got a dick, right? That’s politics like everything else. Go for it.”

“Not so easy, baby. He’s a monomaniac. He talked about the fraudulence of coded language and dog-whistles, how we use concepts like deadnaming and misgendering and cultural appropriation ‘mischievously’—his word.”

“Abortion?” Mab interrupted.

“Ah. Get this. He says he’s pro-choice, including pro a lifetime of choices for all the aborted so-called babies. You see? Quiet. But clever. He knows our litany as though we’ve

catechized *him*—and has an answer for it all, for everything we've programmed in our news outlets, commentators, the professoriate, pop cult acolytes. He's dangerous."

"Should I take my crack at him?"

Estelle chuckled. "Maybe soon. He sees it all falling apart—families, language, large institutions, the whole society, in fact whole societies, concepts like 'nation,' 'male,' female.' *He gets it.* He mentioned Ragnarok, the Apocalypse."

"What do we do honey?"

"We keep our focus. Beyond anarchy, beyond nihilism. No truth, no fact. *Entropy is our objective!*" She was breathing fast and hard. "From language and sex, to public institutions, history, borders, cultural iconography. Unfix everything—all is uncertain—except what is convenient to the Movement. Name-call and demonize, then accuse the other side of those very things. Invent as many isms as possible. Keep the phobias coming." She was almost breathless. "Half truths. To oppose illegal immigration is to oppose immigration: xenophobic, racist. Patriotism is nationalism, which must not be defined. No matter what we do and how we speak, our identity is gender, race, ethnicity and how we fuck, not our values, our past, our upbringing. And always remember, *they* are the fascists." Her back arched, she panted, then came a moaning low and long, and a yell.

Mab waited. "Phew. A no-touch for the ages. Now take a taste of me and we'll both feel better."

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The next day the young man was eating lunch in a college cafeteria, more hospital than ivy league. He was sitting with another student, the plain girl, Faustina. He stared straight ahead as he chewed. It occurred to him that he had forgotten to take something to drink and was about to go back to the counter when, just then, the beautiful woman walked to the small table and, ignoring the girl, asked if he minded company. Without smiling but with eye contact he said "no," and she sat.

She was in a black blouse buttoned to the neck and a long black skirt, so her hair and creamy complexion were highlighted, all mediated by a brilliant diamond necklace falling over the blouse. As she sat she placed a cup of tea near the man. "I noticed you had nothing to drink."

"Thank you. I saw you come in. I was hoping you'd come over.

"We should chat about this and that."

"Why? Why has randomness held? And this," he said, and showed her a book, Rovelli's *Reality is Not What It Seems*. "That cheat was *reading* from it—what he calls lecturing."

“You take it so personally.”

The young man looked into her eyes. “What do you think of Rovelli?”

Grinning, she looked from him to the girl and back again. The girl was remote. “I think he claims it all devolves into math because that’s all he has, math. Convenient. And you?”

“That Rovelli is right but, being a simple-minded atheist, he doesn’t know just how right he is.” There was silence. “Is *God* Rovelli’s ‘randomness’? Something keeps the world fixed—and I don’t buy an abstraction, if only because it’s all been tuned too right for too long. Doesn’t seem random.”

She slapped the table. “So then,” softly, “tell me how God fits.”

“Granularity, that’s us. Indeterminacy, that’s our civilization. Relationality, that’s our morality. And Planck’s Length? That’s our size, but only figuratively. We actually have no dimension at all.”

“We?”

“The whole works. That granular quantum world, you, me, the

globe, the entire cosmos—we are nothing more than an idea. In his mind. And, being the great artist he is, his conception allows for his little darlings to act as they will, like a story-writer who seems not to know what his characters will do next.”

“And the point?”

“That’s tricky, because language is tricky. I use the word ‘mind’ and right away we jump to the minds we know, our own. But that big mind . . . it’s like ours but also different, very different.

“And the point?” she repeated.

“Ah. For us to become more than an idea.”

“Wow. Anything else? What of the devil?”

“Nothing you don’t know.”

Estelle grinned more widely. “I see. Anything else?”

“Once upon a time that mind squeezed a part of itself into the idea and walked among us.”

"Jesus! . . . I mean, Jesus?"

"Apparently. Also it seems that when this Jesus aspect left, another aspect stayed behind, so he's outside *and* inside."

"I see. And you believe that?"

"Makes sense. It gets us past random. It amplifies the mind's purposefulness."

"And there's more . . ." She had tilted her head to one side, eyes sparkling.

"This mind want participants, I think. He—or she—it doesn't matter—wants us to have loving, independent minds of our own. The mind would bring us out of his mere *conception*. To be with him. You see, the mind *is* existence. Outside of it is nothing . . . *nihil*."

"I see," she said again, still smiling, and then stood, sinuously. "Until next time?" —and walked away.

Faustina said, "she is troubled, but not by the desolations."

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Soon micro-catastrophes began to occur. Tables and chairs in private homes crumbled to dust, and the dust disappeared. Traffic lights would alternate between red and green so rapidly that people were seeing one color and crashing into each other. Puddled water began to rise from gutters. Winds blew straight downward, sometimes so powerfully as to fix pedestrians in place. The chattering class urged the United Nations to pass a resolution preserving the maintenance of the four fundamental forces, and, notwithstanding its vagueness, the resolution passed. Many people were now assured that the danger would wane, and for a while it did, with catastrophic phenomena diminishing in number, scope, and intensity. Still, the few people who noticed these phenomena and did not blame the president or climate change began to visit their houses of worship more frequently than was their custom.

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The professor professed impartiality. He simply did not know how or why things were happening as they were.

“Can’t you tell us why,” shouted Estelle, “the disintegrations are ceasing?”

“Maybe . . . maybe because a mind holds all together?” He was almost tearful. “If that mind ceases to pay attention to

its conception then the conception disappears.”

“And now,” shouted the young man, who had sprung to his feet, “people are speaking to it. But that’s not why our esteemed professor is changing. He’s merely frightened and so is placing a different wager. Been re-visiting Pascal, professor?” The class, conditioned to irony, which was the temper of the times, laughed uproariously.

Estelle rose like a slow-burning flame. She was wearing a body-fitted, red jump suit that seemed to brighten with her undifferentiated passion.

The class hushed. “And why,” she asked the young man, who was also standing, “would conversation, as you call it, matter?”

“Because,” he answered, “conversation gets the mind’s attention, and it’s happy to know and to be known, which is the main purpose of all good conversation.”

“Really?” she said. Prancing to the aisle, she walked down the stairs towards the professor.

“Do you believe that?” she asked him.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Well, then, no randomness?”

“I do suspect that the conception in the mind is one thing, with no fundamental separation between society and its people and the sub-atomic world. Inter-animated, I would say. A two-way street. Now those promoting randomness are having their influence.”

“Really? Well, I’m with randomness. Watch. I would like a random A+ in this class, professor.”

His knees buckled.

“Come with me,” she commanded, as she took him by the hand and began to lead him out of the room. “Class dismissed,” she shouted. The students yelped.

Faustina muttered, “that was not random.”

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The next week the young man visited Estelle, who, after again running into him at lunch when he was alone, had invited him to her apartment.

“Thank you for joining me. And . . . what is your name?”

“Jeremiah.”

“Jeremiah. Biblical. Do you believe literally, Jerry?”

“I prefer Jeremiah. No, not quite. You see, what’s happening now has happened before, and those past cataclysms have been reported—but not exactly as they happened. More as allegories, you might say.”

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Estelle’s apartment was a crystalline glass-and-steel contrivance, high up and with a stunning view of the city below, brilliantly appointed in white, where neither dirt nor clutter dared show themselves. Estelle seemed as fresh as the morning after a spring shower, like a teenager in a fifties sitcom.

“How so?” she asked almost conspiratorially.

“The Tower of Babylon. The Great Flood. These happened, though not as tower and flood. They happened as our apocalypse is happening, though mutedly. A disintegration of time, space and basic forces. Frustrating to think about, really. The lines that divide science, theology and philosophy are—these aren’t real divisions. But how else can we understand them?”

“I see.” It was Mab, who had walked in from the bedroom wearing a thong, a nightie, and puffy high-heeled slippers.

"I'm Mab, Estelle's lover and friend. Nice to meet you. Isn't this place impeccable? Like Estelle!"

"Hello," Jeremiah murmured. "Not the word I would choose."

"Oh dear," she answered.

"Listen, Jerry." It was Mab. "Come with us into the bedroom. We want you to enjoy some genuinely random fun. Our bodies are playlands, our skills thrilling rides!"

"Okay," he answered. "Lead the way."

The two women looked at each other with surprise, smiled, rose, and together walked towards the bedroom, Jeremiah following. As soon as they entered, Jeremiah, who had not yet entered, slammed the door shut behind them.

It didn't take more than a few heartbeats. Estelle yowled. A prolonged screech. She came out of the room shaking like an epileptic in a fit, her eyes darkened moons, her hair standing straight out from her head, her skin tissue-thin and translucent. She was urinating.

Jeremiah dashed to her and hugged her as though holding her together.

She looked up at him. He was taller than she had realized.
"You. You . . . "

"No. She, with your help. Others will follow. The selection will not be random."

"Dust. A small . . . gathering . . . of dust." She was mimicking with her hands.

"The dust is gone, too. Look around. The furniture nearly transparent. You nearly transparent."

Estelle screamed, "*what can I do?*"

"You might try speaking with the mind," Jeremiah said, and left.

Estelle got an A+ in the physics class. The professor, who received a note from Faustina that read "next time it will not stop," retired immediately.

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The following week Jeremiah met Estelle for breakfast. She was in baggy jeans and floppy sweatshirt. She wore no makeup; her hair was piled atop of her head. "Will you stay with me?" she asked.

"You seem somehow random," he said. She asked again. He said, "you aren't you know. Random. Nothing is."

She was single-minded. "*Will you stay?*" and Jeremiah answered, "yes, but *for* you, not *with* you, and only for a while."

"Thank you thank you thank you" she muttered, and Jeremiah said, "oh, don't thank me," and Estelle closed her eyes, clasped her hands like a saint at prayer, and mumbled "thank you."

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People did notice that the calamities had nearly stopped (gender-specific pronouns made a modest comeback), even though neither the climate nor the president had changed. Poets and story-tellers began to write their allegories, novels, movies, and mythologies about what had happened. Scholars wrote their monographs, historians their histories, preachers their sermons. Eventually, the strange turbulence became an artifact of the lowest denominator of popular culture, like Elvis Lives and the Bermuda Triangle, and dropped into the black hole of yesterday.

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Jeremiah disappeared, leaving behind this fragment with Faustina. From time-to-time Estelle remembered the young man but didn't really miss him. No one did, except those who would meet Faustina, who lives on.

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