

## THE HIGGS BOSON, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

*Experts find 'God particle' ...sort of*

-- headline in *The Washington Post*

The jubilant physicists who caught a glimpse  
of the God particle, or something like it,  
have a hard time saying what they saw  
since they didn't exactly see it.  
A boson – unlike, say, a bison – is so small  
and burns up so fast you can only tell it was there  
by what's left behind, like the fine line  
on an X-ray once the stress fracture heals.  
But after 800 trillion collisions  
in a tunnel under the Alps, they're pretty darn sure  
they saw a Higgs boson, or something like it.  
“We have found something,” one proclaimed,  
“which is consistent with what we were looking for,”  
and you could tell he wasn't overstating it.  
One chance in 3.5 million it was a fluke –  
a confidence I've never come close to, looking at the sky  
or my watch or a fastball down the middle.  
This was big. Reporters had to mix new metaphors  
for the Big Bang, the Grail, the final answer  
to a question I hadn't thought to ask:  
Why *does* matter have mass?  
The Higgs field, it says here in *The Times*, is a drag,  
sticky like molasses, and slows down protons  
just enough for them to gather a little mass  
the way legislation picks up amendments on Capitol Hill.  
Without the Higgs, or something like it, everything  
would zoom around at the speed of light,  
slipping through our hands like moonlight.  
Except we wouldn't have hands. We wouldn't exist  
and there wouldn't be any moon  
to reflect light from the nonexistent sun.  
No Higgs, no atoms, no matter, no us. So it's a relief  
to know there's a boson, or something like it,  
and hear Nobel-brilliant scientists  
struggle to talk about the universe  
in mere massless words such as *molasses*.  
How they hate that name God particle, coined  
by one of their own for what he couldn't see  
or hold like moonlight in his hand, but still believed in.

## CANCER

Call me The Crab – the other word has such  
a bad name. I move sideways, hide inside  
my shell. I break in unannounced  
when something tiny no one understands  
goes haywire in a cell. Leave blame out of it.  
Just say I run amok, a flourishing  
malignancy disguised as growth,  
the quintessential inside job.  
My work, up close under a microscope,  
is beautiful – abstract expressionist –  
damage soaking up the dye in purple swirls.  
Don't call me terrorist – you  
who bomb and burn, poison, cut and run.  
I'm part of you and I will not be gone.

## CROSSING THE MUDDY

We heard it first, a rushing  
in the canyon beyond the trees  
like a big wind without lull  
and even after we broke out of the woods  
it was hidden by a pileup  
of tree trunks and boulders,  
outwash from the last great flood.

The Muddy Fork of the Sandy River  
is not muddy or sandy  
but clouded green-brown with fine silt  
a glacier scraped off the mountain.  
Impossible, where the trail ends in fast water,  
to tell how deep it goes or where  
the footing lies if there is footing.

A hundred yards upstream, better odds:  
a tight spillway between stone shelves.  
Not five feet across – an easy leap  
if this were a playground or a sawdust pit.  
I heaved my pack over  
and practiced with my eyes, then jumped  
stumbling onto the far solid rock.

Did I say solid? With the kid still  
on the other side of hurling water?  
*Don't look down. Keep your weight moving  
forward.* She locked in, rocked back and forth  
and flew to a perfect landing  
as I caught her thin wrist.  
*Momentum*, she said. *It's the key to everything.*

What could she know, at 13, of life's crossings  
besides how to take aim and throw her all  
in one direction? Which was enough  
on opposite sides of the Muddy  
for her, unschooled in the art of hesitation,  
and me, one hand out over white water,  
all momentum the other way.

## FOR THE MOST PART

Except anchovies and now (doctor's orders) cheese,  
Except 13, except when it's the only window seat left,  
Except a glass of white wine with dinner,  
Except the Cubs, except Ernie Banks saying "Let's play two,"  
Except Elvis and Jesus, except Oprah and Madonna,  
Except snowflakes, each, and Starbucks, all,  
Except Las Vegas or Buffalo or Salt Lake,  
Except North Dakota, except Mississippi,  
Except spiders and jellyfish, rattlesnakes and slugs,  
Except the duck-billed platypus and the dodo bird,  
Except music, which doesn't have to say so,  
Except Rothko, his red, and Stevens, his angel, his 13 blackbirds.  
Except libertarians, except when they happen to be right,  
Except World War II, when we knew why,  
Except to save the life of the mother,  
Except the fine print, the back story, the chapter torn out,  
Except in translation, except what gets lost.

## ALONG MINK BROOK, EARLY SPRING

The locals have laid down their annual bets  
on when the thick lake ice will break up  
but here the creaking and cracking already  
make way for slow dark water.

A raft of ice drifts upstream, a smooth white sail,  
wind winning for a while against water  
on its long downfall to the sea.

The day after the funeral, we walk out  
into the cold light of this earthly world  
which goes on unmoved by our need for naming.

I'm an amateur thumbing through my Audubon,  
trying to keep up, sidetracked by names.

I rejoice in them all, the phoebe

Joanne just spotted, her first of the season,  
the kingfisher going berserk across the water,  
juncos, flickers, chickadees, crows,

common mergansers – rare *somewhere* –  
and, out by the ice floe, the ring-necked gull  
which has no ring around its neck.

Then the song sparrow, the one

I couldn't see in the brushy white pine,  
flies out and lights on a willow shoot  
and sways colorless in silhouette against watery light,  
a dusky little nameless bird until it sings.