

How Not to Be a Cosmologist

for Ann Burgess

Backing into the lane at midday
on the way to the Fisher Library, turning off
the suddenly-too-loud radio
the last thing I hear
is that we are about to talk to a famous
cosmologist.

A cosmologist?
how can that be?
I know that an *astronomer*
is technically a namer of stars
and that an *astrologist* tries to make sense of them
the way a soap opera
makes sense of history
or the mess one has made of one's marriage
but the notion of an expert
in the logic of the Cosmos
seems suddenly strange to me
as if someone could really be
a specialist in Everything
or, if they could, would be much different
from a poet, say,
or the tumbling universe inside one of the trucks
of the Leichhardt Municipal Council's
Waste Collection service.

An *astronomer* friend of mine
tells me that she studies parts
but a *cosmologist* studies the whole;

I don't mean to doubt her
but how can there be
a whole that isn't inside another one?
and how can a study of wholes
be anything other than a study of parts?
if a whole is everything, then how can
everything be all there is?

It seems, at the very least, that studying the Cosmos
would have some serious problems of scale, like trying
to reconstruct the Second World War
from a matchbox found in Alaska
or the entire Serengeti Game Park
from inside a parasite
inside a wart in an elephant's ear.

In my short life I must have heard
twenty-five different theories of the cosmos
and although you might think
twenty-five different cosmologists
couldn't be wrong
all twenty-five of them were sure
the other twenty-four were
which isn't completely to dismiss the possibility
that one of them might
one day come up with something
although I myself would make no claims, nor think
sitting out in the courtyard
late on New Year's Eve 2001
looking up at the sky
and imagining that the vast sheet of cloud
slipping by under the

almost-full moon
was like a ghostly Soviet army
marching past Josef Stalin
on May Day 1937
would rate very highly
as an example of the discipline.

The theory I like
is the one that says that everything that is
is just ancient light arriving
after millions of years—
even me, even the cosmologist, even this poem—
and that the world
is no more than another screen
erected by Atlas Copco
in an endless cinema
called, let's say, *The Majestic*
or *The Infinite Starlight Drive-In*

David Brooks

