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## The Timely Demise of Entropy

IT WAS A MORNING LIKE any other. For you or me, at least. Haul carcass out of warm bed, stumble through maze to stove, heat kettle, hope you survive the five minutes it takes to boil . . . .

But it was not a morning like any other for The Second Law of Thermodynamics. And The Second Law knew this from the moment the garbage truck rumbled past his window, dumping the new day into his troubled dreams of one-way streets and unwanted surgeries.

Things had been going poorly in the world for quite some while. Which is usually good news for The Second Law. Business is up when systems crumble. Pollution, divorce, senility, spam—all can be blamed on The Second Law, and generally are. No Trappist monk, The Second Law never objects to grabbing an ovation and coming back for an encore. And people, exhausted from dog-paddling through a pea soup of half-price coupons and half-lived lives, seldom object to relinquishing responsibility (and with it, freedom) to a force greater than themselves for things they would rather not have to do something about. It's just easier on everyone that way. And what better greater force to hand it all off to than the bottomless satchel of The Second Law, popularly (albeit imprecisely) known as: The Inevitable Decline of All Things. Or more colloquially still: Inevitability.

In all likelihood, things would have continued to unravel quite splendidly had there not been that cock-up in booking the Bengal Room last month. The regalness of the chamber was in name only, as it was located down a dank, subterranean staircase in the stagnant bowels of the century-old Orient Hotel and Pub—a Vancouver Island landmark, to be sure, but one that had already snatched a few illicit tumbles with The Second Law.

Nothing went unwitnessed down in the Bengal, where an ancient water stain scrawled its way across the greying wallpaper below a phalanx of mangy heads, lips and glass eyes belonging to various game animals large and small, plus one squirrel. An unclaimed pair of penny loafers in the closet

had gone green. And the carpet, while presumably not original, appeared to contain all the careless extrusions of the tired, thirsty, dying coal miners who first inhabited the space. It was a venue best avoided by people with pre-existing respiratory conditions. But it was private, sequestered from the commotion of the off-track betting upstairs, got buzzed by the barmaid often enough to keep everyone happy, and could be rented for fifteen dollars a night.

Everybody knew Tuesdays were Math Trivia Night in the Bengal. Which was why it wasn't written in the book. Everybody, that is, except Jano's replacement at the bar, who took the call from the post-modern poets. The pomopos, already adrift in altered brain chemistry, needed to book the Bengal for an urgent coffeehouse in memory of one of their more linguistically radical members who disappeared last month in the city's Hammerhead Park.

i.b. noone was last seen tossing pebbles into the duck pond. The morning of the phone call, a small raft made from alder saplings had washed ashore near the footbridge. Its only passenger, a damp Tim Horton's box stuffed with poems scrawled on sugary brown napkins. Their original sequence was unknown but also fairly irrelevant. It was, however, imperative that the poems be shared as soon as possible so that i.b.'s creative animus could be released from this realm and allowed to deconstruct the next. Jano's replacement, a bouncy summer student majoring in Leisure Studies, told the pomopos the Bengal was free that very night.

The mathematicians from the University (joined by a few theoretical physicists) were squabbling about a disqualified answer on quadratic equations and scarcely noticed the poets file in. The poets, catching fragments of disjunctive argument, assumed the mathematicians were out-of-town pomopos come to pay their respects.

The reading commenced in a far corner and initially went better than might have been expected. The poets construed the escalating math fight to be a contribution of sorts—a polyphonic text augmenting i.b.'s original work by heightening its anti-absorptive properties. It was, in fact, a rather brilliant deconstruction of artistic ownership and authorship, blurring the object/audience boundary to near invisibility.

Before long the mathematicians were battling it out on the chalkboard (they had yet to conclude a Trivia Night any other way), cheered on by their boisterous colleagues hoisting frothy mugs. Kendrake, a portly quantum physicist, began raging about the banality of random matrices when his teetering mass, supported by two spindly chair legs, gave a first-class demonstration of gravitational vectors in action, unfortunately flattening

a hastily-sewn likeness of dear departed i.b., which had been propped on a nearby barstool. And the absent signifier for shit hit the proverbial fan.

Had the mathematicians been commingled with Modernists of the Pound/Imagist tradition, the whole evening would have doubtless unfolded quite differently. Modernists can at least be reasoned with. And if reason fails, any half-fresh metaphor will shut them up. But your basic factory-farmed Modernist would dissipate faster than you can say “dawn-hung mist” upon stumbling into a coffeehouse with a pomopo at the mike. So the situation really was quite hopeless. The pomopos—clad in their hallowed banner of “oui wl *nt* b undrstd!”—weren’t ceding any ground. And neither were the mathematicians.

The barmaid had long since fled the room (presumably to call the cops), when Kendrake bellowed above the word slurry “Chaos trumps sentimentality!” and hurled the now-limbless i.b. likeness at the mike stand. A nanosecond of silence smacked the rioters like a stun gun—just enough of an opening for pepsi, the youngest of the pomopos, to hammer her own verbal slapshot into the net. It was the only complete sentence (in fact several in a row) that anyone had ever heard pass her pale lips.

“Perhaps all that we call chaos, randomness, increasing disorder in a previously ordered system,” she began in a voice as wispy as her waifish self, “is really just order fleeing to higher ground, leaving us with the illusion of randomness in the form of its unwanted trash. The way you leave a full wastebasket and yesterday’s newspaper and wet towels in a hotel room when you check out. These items and their placement are actually highly ordered and predictable when viewed within the larger context of time and space framing them. In fact, the frame is everything. How big do we want to go?”

Well, there was no stuffing that text back in the grand narrative. When the mathematicians stopped gulping air, the theorems, calculations and proofs spurted forth like Cheez Whiz at a stag party. And they were just as swiftly reformatted by the pomopos. By daybreak (which was indistinguishable from midnight in the Bengal) all players sat slumped in chairs or grotty corners—some missing shoes, buttons. (Kendrake was down to his boxers.) pepsi never said another word, having slipped out shortly after face-off to go search Hammerhead Park for i.b., whose demise she had never truly accepted.

But the deed had been done. You can’t unthink a thought or unshift a paradigm. What was uncorked in the Bengal that evening proceeded to seep out to the street, under every door, through every air duct, into every water supply, every gas tank, every take-out menu, every dumpster, every bed. Before long, even the lowliest shopping-cart wrangler was questioning

the entire hypothesis (it had already been demoted from Law) of Inevitable Decline. Chambermaids were stretching the frame, seeing hidden levels of organization—and possibility. Bad marriages, sick buildings, empty jobs, muddy killing fields, ailing bodies, square houses, pill boxes, asphalt, frankenfood, uniforms of every kind, were all being dropped where they stood, walked out on, left to lie in their own declining shadows almost like, well ... wet towels in a hotel room.

The Second Law knew the gig was up. It was time to blow this pop stand and find another batch of suckers. It's one helluva big goddam galaxy out there. But next time, throw a sop to Order and keep the poets and the math geeks in separate rooms.