

This is a Universe

The arms of our galaxy cradle us,
but not just us
Her loving embrace clutches 3,916
separate solar systems to the
supermassive black hole that is her heart.

And the Milky Way is one of trillions
out there in the cosmic dark.

The enormity of the universe overwhelms our minds
and we freeze
deer in the headlights
terrified of our sudden smallness
in the shadow of the trillions
and the habitable planets they must support.

But to gain true understanding and wisdom
our lens must be capable of widening, spreading open enough to
grasp the incalculable
and narrow enough to see
a person.

A heart, a life, a brain
full of neurons and dreams. A soul, a
glowing single star in a busy heaven.

When young people learn about war
we go big picture:
geopolitical causes and effects, the
major international players, names

listed on multiple choice tests.

“Name five reasons why World War I was so deadly.”

“Recount the movements of the troops at D-Day.”

“In five paragraphs, describe the methods used and the impact that resulted from Sherman’s March to the Sea.”

“How many people died in the Vietnam War?”

- a. 30,000
- b. 40,000
- c. 50,000
- d. 60,000”

Trick question. I said *people*, not soldiers.

Think of the black mirrored memorial at our nation’s capitol,
the names upon names upon names
or even the memorial here, right here.

If you are indeed brave
and seek true understanding
focus your gaze on one name,
a single star
on the horizon.

And let it be more than an arrangement
of letters under a fluttering flag,
taps echoing between the stones we’ve erected
for us to look at

one day a year and drive by the other 364.

All of the stories are true, and all of them deserve to be told.

There are as many stories and stories of souls as there are galaxies
stretched out of the blue and into the black
we want to call these sums uncountable
unfathomable.

It hurts, sometimes, to stretch our minds so far.
We cannot allow the pain of stretching
and the strength required to hold this
concept of vastness
prevent us from enlightenment.

But how?

Take every name on this wall or every name on every memorial wall
Those who gave their lives
and those who had their lives taken
and the lives they took in turn
those who never fought but faithfully served
and the families at home who waited for them.

Take those who served steadily, readily
and those who are vulnerable
who enlist for the tuition money
or to escape something or someone in their lives
and others whose lives were course-corrected
the unhoused person you see on the street with a sign that says VETERAN -
ANYTHING HELPS - GOD BLESS

Look at them not as the uncountable
as immeasurable as the universe

Instead, imagine them all
not as distant stars sending us pulses of old, cold light
but see them as babies
just born
wrinkly and crying
placed for the first time in their mother's arms.

No future.

No past.

Just that moment.

That is how precious they are.

Now, wave your flags and blow on your brass
generously give your thanks
and fire blanks into the sky

But as you do

Think of those tiny hands
and that first cry.