

ALSO BY
JOHN GREEN

Looking for Alaska

An Abundance of Katherines

Paper Towns

The Fault in Our Stars

Turtles All the Way Down

THE ANTHROPOCENE REVIEWED

Essays on a Human-Centered Planet

by John Green



DUTTON



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I have to confess I'm not a huge fan of copyright pages in general with their small type, obtuse verbiage, and morally
charged legalese. I do appreciate, though, that copyright pages identify the book's font, as above. Designer Anna
Booth set this book in Bembo MT Pro. Bembo was released in 1929 by the Monotype Corporation, but it is based
on a design first cut in 1495 by Francesco Griffo, who worked for the famed Venetian printer Aldus Manutius. The
first printing press arrived in Venice in 1469, within thirty years, there were more than four hundred presses, printing
everything from Greek classics to travelogues. The typeface Bembo is based on was first used to print Pietro Bembo's
short memoir of visiting Mt. Etna. Robert Slimbach has called Griffo's font design an "ideal balance of beauty and
functionality," and although I'm no font designer, I agree. I give Bembo MT Pro four and a half stars.

To my friends, colleagues, and fellow travelers
Rosiana Halse Rojas and Stan Muller

graduation song, and as a we-just-beat-Barcelona-in-the-Champions-League song. As former Liverpool player and manager Kenny Dalglish said, "It covers adversity and sadness and it covers the success." It's a song about sticking together even when your dreams are tossed and blown. It's a song about both the storm and the golden sky.

At first blush, it may seem odd that the world's most popular football song comes from musical theater. But football is theater, and fans make it musical theater. The anthem of West Ham United is called "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," and at the start of each game, you'll see thousands of grown adults blowing bubbles from the stands as they sing, "I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air / They fly so high, nearly reach the sky / Then like my dreams, they fade and die." Manchester United fans refashioned Julia Ward Howe's U.S. Civil War anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic" into the song "Glory, Glory Man United." Manchester City fans sing "Blue Moon," a 1934 Rodgers and Hart number.

All these songs are made great by the communities singing them. They are assertions of unity in sorrow and unity in triumph: Whether the bubble is flying or bursting, we sing together.

"You'll Never Walk Alone" is cheesy, but it's not wrong. The song doesn't claim the world is a just or happy place. It just asks us to walk on with hope in our hearts. And like Louise at the end of *Carousel*, even if you don't really believe in the golden sky or the sweet silver song of the lark when you start singing, you believe it a little more when you finish.

In March 2020, a video made the rounds online in which a group of British paramedics sang "You'll Never Walk Alone" through a glass wall to coworkers on the other side, who were in an intensive care unit. The paramedics were trying to encourage their colleagues. What a word that is, *en-courage*. Though our dreams be tossed and blown, still we sing ourselves and one another into courage.

I give "You'll Never Walk Alone" four and a half stars.

HUMANITY'S TEMPORAL RANGE

WHEN I WAS NINE OR TEN, I saw a planetarium show at the Orlando Science Center in which the host, with no apparent emotion in his voice, explained that in about a billion years, the sun will be 10 percent more luminescent than it is now, likely resulting in the runaway evaporation of Earth's oceans. In about four billion years, Earth's surface will become so hot that it will melt. In seven or eight billion years, the sun will be a red giant star, and it will expand until eventually our planet will be sucked into it, and any remaining Earthly evidence of what we thought or said or did will be absorbed into a burning sphere of plasma.

Thanks for visiting the Orlando Science Center. The exit is to your left.

It has taken me most of the last thirty-five years to recover from that presentation. I would later learn that many of the stars we see in the night sky are red giants, including Arcturus. Red giants are common. It is common for stars to grow larger and engulf their once-habitable solar systems. It's no wonder we worry about the end of the world. Worlds end all the time.

A 2012 survey conducted across twenty countries found wide variance in the percentage of people who believe humanity will end within their lifetimes. In France, 6 percent of those polled did; in the United States, 22 percent. This makes a kind of sense: France has been home to apocalyptic preachers—the bishop Martin of Tours, for instance, wrote “There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born.” But that was back in the fourth century. American apocalypticism has a much more recent history, from Shaker predictions the world would end in 1794 to famed radio evangelist Harold Camping’s calculations that the apocalypse was coming in 1994—and then, when that didn’t happen, in 1995. Camping went on to announce that the end times would commence on May 21, 2011, after which would come “five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21st, 2011 with the final destruction of the world.” When none of this came to pass, Camping said, “We humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing,” although for the record no individual ever humbly acknowledged anything while referring to themselves as “we.” I’m reminded of something my religion professor Donald Rogan told me once: “Never predict the end of the world. You’re almost certain to be wrong, and if you’re right, no one will be around to congratulate you.”

Camping’s personal apocalypse arrived in 2013, when he died at the age of ninety-two. Part of our fears about the world ending must stem from the strange reality that for each of us *our* world will end, and soon. In that sense, maybe apocalyptic anxieties are a by-product of humanity’s astonishing capacity for narcissism. How could the world possibly survive the death of its single most important inhabitant—me? But I think something else is at work. We know we will end in part because we know other species have ended.

“Modern humans,” as we are called by paleontologists, have been around for about 250,000 years. This is our so-called “temporal range,”

the length of time we’ve been a species. Contemporary elephants are at least ten times older than us—their temporal range extends back to the Pliocene Epoch, which ended more than 2.5 million years ago. Alpacas have been around for something like 10 million years—forty times longer than us. The tuatara, a species of reptile that lives in New Zealand, first emerged around 240 million years ago. They’ve been here a thousand times longer than we have, since before Earth’s supercontinent of Pangaea began to break apart.

We are younger than polar bears and coyotes and blue whales and camels. We are also far younger than many animals we drove to extinction, from the dodo to the giant sloth.

In the spring of 2020, a few weeks after the emergence of a novel coronavirus began to shut schools and clear out grocery stores in the U.S., someone sent me a collection they’d made of times I’d publicly mentioned my fear of an infectious disease pandemic. On the podcast *10 Things That Scare Me*, I’d listed near the top, “a global disease pandemic that will result in the breakdown of human norms.” Years earlier, in a video about world history, I’d speculated about what might happen “if some superbug shows up tomorrow and it travels all these global trade routes.” In 2019, I’d said on a podcast, “We all must prepare ourselves for the global pandemic we all know is coming.” And yet, I did nothing to prepare. The future, even in its inevitabilities, always feels vague and nebulous to me—until it doesn’t.

After my kids’ school closed, and after I’d found a mask that I’d bought years earlier to minimize sawdust inhalation while building their tree house, but long before I understood the scope of the pandemic, I called my brother, Hank, and told him I was feeling frightened. Hank is the levelheaded one, the sane one, the calm one. He always has been. We have never let the fact of my being older get in the way of Hank

being the wise older brother. Ever since we were little, one of the ways I've managed my anxiety is by looking to him. My brain cannot reliably report to me whether a perceived threat is really real, and so I look at Hank, and I see that he's not panicked, and I tell myself that I'm okay. If anything were *truly* wrong, Hank wouldn't be able to portray such calm confidence.

So I told Hank I was scared.

"The species will survive this," he answered, a little hitch in his voice.

"*The species will survive this?* That's all you've got for me???"

He paused. I could hear the tremble in his breath, the tremble he's been hearing in my breath our whole lives. "That's what I've got for you," he said after a moment.

I told Hank I'd bought sixty cans of Diet Dr Pepper, so that I could drink two for each day of the lockdown.

And only then could I hear the old smile, the my-older-brother-really-is-a-piece-of-work smile. "For someone who has spent four decades worrying about disease pandemics," he said, "you sure don't know how disease pandemics work."

One rule of retail marketing maintains that to maximize sales, businesses need to create a sense of urgency. *Mega-sale ends soon! Only a few tickets still available!* These commercial threats, especially in the age of e-commerce, are almost always a fiction. But they're effective, an echo of our apocalyptic visions: If we feel a sense of urgency about the human experiment, maybe we'll actually get to work, whether that's rushing to save souls before the Rapture or rushing to address climate change.

I try to remind myself that back in the fourth century, Martin of Tours's eschatological anxiety must have felt as real to him as my current anxiety feels to me. A thousand years ago, floods and plagues were seen as apocalyptic portents, because they were glimpses of a power far

beyond our understanding. By the time I was growing up, amid the rise of computers and hydrogen bombs, Y2K and nuclear winter made for better apocalyptic worries. Today, these worries sometimes focus on artificial intelligence run amok, or on a species-crushing pandemic that we have proven ourselves thoroughly unprepared for, but most commonly my worry takes the form of climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety—terms that did not exist a few decades ago but are now widespread phenomena.

Humans are already an ecological catastrophe. In just 250,000 years, our behavior has led to the extinction of many species, and driven many more into steep decline. This is lamentable, and it is also increasingly needless. We probably didn't know what we were doing thousands of years ago as we hunted some large mammals to extinction. But we know what we're doing now. We know how to tread more lightly upon the earth. We could choose to use less energy, eat less meat, clear fewer forests. And we choose not to. As a result, for many forms of life, humanity is the apocalypse.

There are worldviews that embrace cyclic cosmologies—Hindu eschatology, for instance, lays out a series of multibillion-year periods called kalpas during which the world goes through a cycle of formation, maintenance, and then decline. But in linear eschatologies, the end times for humanity are often referred to as "the end of the world," even though our departure from Earth will very probably not be the end of the world, nor will it be the end of life in the world.

Humans are a threat to our own species and to many others, but the planet will survive us. In fact, it may only take life on Earth a few million years to recover from us. Life has bounced back from far more serious shocks. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, during the Permian extinction, ocean surface waters likely reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit, or 40 degrees Celsius. Ninety-five percent of Earth's species went extinct,

and for five million years afterward, Earth was a "dead zone" with little expansion of life.

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid impact caused a dust cloud so huge that darkness may have pervaded Earth for *two years*, virtually stopping photosynthesis and leading to the extinction of 75 percent of land animals. Measured against these disasters, we're just not that important. When Earth is done with us, it'll be like, "Well, that Human Pox wasn't great, but at least I didn't get Large Asteroid Syndrome."

The hard part, evolutionarily, was getting from prokaryotic cells to eukaryotic ones, and then getting from single-celled organisms to multicellular ones. Earth is around 4.5 billion years old, a timescale I simply cannot get my head around. Instead, let's imagine Earth's history as a calendar year, with the formation of Earth being January 1, and today being December 31 at 11:59 PM. The first life on Earth emerges around February 25. Photosynthetic organisms first appear in late March. Multicellular life doesn't appear until August or September. The first dinosaurs like *eoraptor* show up about 230 million years ago, or December 13 in our calendar year. The meteor impact that heralds the end of the dinosaurs happens around December 26. *Homo sapiens* aren't part of the story until December 31 at 11:48 PM.²

Put another way: It took Earth about three billion years to go from single-celled life to multicellular life. It took less than seventy million years to go from *Tyrannosaurus rex* to humans who can read and write and dig up fossils and approximate the timeline of life and worry about its ending. Unless we somehow manage to eliminate all multicellular life from the planet, Earth won't have to start all the way over, and it will be okay—at least until the oceans evaporate and the planet gets consumed by the sun.

But we'll be gone by then, as will our collective and collected

2. Agriculture and large human communities and the building of megalithic structures all occur within the last minute of this calendar year. The Industrial Revolution, two world wars, the invention of basketball, recorded music, the electric dishwasher, and vehicles that travel faster than horses all happen in the last couple of seconds.

memory. I think part of what scares me about the end of humanity is the end of those memories. I believe that if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, it does make a sound. But if no one is around to play Billie Holiday records, those songs really won't make a sound anymore. We've caused a lot of suffering, but we've also caused much else.

I know the world will survive us—and in some ways it will be *more* alive. More birdsong. More creatures roaming around. More plants cracking through our pavement, rewilding the planet we terraformed. I imagine coyotes sleeping in the ruins of the homes we built. I imagine our plastic still washing up on beaches hundreds of years after the last of us is gone. I imagine moths, having no artificial lights toward which to fly, turning back to the moon.

There is some comfort for me in knowing that life will go on even when we don't. But I would argue that when our light goes out, it will be Earth's greatest tragedy, because while I know humans are prone to grandiosity, I also think we are by far the most interesting thing that ever happened on Earth.

It's easy to forget how wondrous humans are, how strange and lovely. Through photography and art, each of us has seen things we'll never see—the surface of Mars, the bioluminescent fish of the deep ocean, a seventeenth-century girl with a pearl earring. Through empathy, we've felt things we might never have otherwise felt. Through the rich world of imagination, we've seen apocalypses large and small.

We're the only part of the known universe that knows it's in a universe. We know we are circling a star that will one day engulf us. We're the only species that knows it has a temporal range.

Complex organisms tend to have shorter temporal ranges than simple ones, and humanity faces tremendous challenges. We need to find a way to survive ourselves—to go on in a world where we are powerful enough

to warm the entire planet but not powerful enough to stop warming it. We may even have to survive our own obsolescence as technology learns to do more of what we do better than we can do it. But we are better positioned to solve our biggest problems than we were one hundred or one thousand years ago. Humans have more collective brainpower than we've ever had, and more resources, and more knowledge collected by our ancestors.

We are also shockingly, stupidly persistent. Early humans probably used many strategies for hunting and fishing, but a common one was persistence hunting. In a persistence hunt, the predator relies on tracking prowess and sheer perseverance. We would follow prey for hours, and each time it would run away from us, we'd follow, and it would run away again, and we'd follow, and it would run away again, until finally the quarry became too exhausted to continue. That's how for tens of thousands of years we've been eating creatures faster and stronger than us.

We. Just. Keep. Going. We spread across seven continents, including one that is entirely too cold for us. We sailed across oceans toward land we couldn't see and couldn't have known we would find. One of my favorite words is *dogged*. I love dogged pursuits, and dogged efforts, and dogged determination. Don't get me wrong—dogs are indeed very dogged. But they ought to call it *humaned*. Humaned determination.

For most of my life, I've believed we're in the fourth quarter of human history, and perhaps even the last days of it. But lately, I've come to believe that such despair only worsens our already slim chance at long-term survival. We must fight like there is something to fight for, like we are something worth fighting for, because we are. And so I choose to believe that we are not approaching the apocalypse, that the end is not coming, and that we will find a way to survive the coming changes.

"Change," Octavia Butler wrote, "is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe." And who am I to say we are done

changing? Who am I to say that Butler was wrong when she wrote "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars"? These days, I choose to believe that our persistence and our adaptability will allow us to keep changing with the universe for a very, very long time.

So far, at a paltry 250,000 years, it's hard to give humanity's temporal range more than one star. But while I initially found my brother's words distressing, these days I find myself repeating them, and believing them. He was right. He always is. The species will survive this, and much more to come.

And so in hope, and in expectation, I give our temporal range four stars.

How recent is penicillin? That police officer's daughter, who ended up in the orphanage, is still alive as of this writing. Sheila Alexander married an American soldier and moved to California. She's a painter. One of her recent paintings depicts a block of homes in an English village. Ivy grows up along the wall of one home, creeping over rough stone.

To me, one of the mysteries of life is *why* life wants to be. Life is so much more biochemical work than chemical equilibrium, but still, staph desperately seeks that work. As do I, come to think of it. *Staphylococcus* doesn't want to harm people. It doesn't know about people. It just wants to be, like I want to go on, like that ivy wants to spread across the wall, occupying more and more of it. How much? As much as it can.

It's not staph's fault that it wants to be. Nonetheless, I give *Staphylococcus aureus* one star.

THE INTERNET

WHEN THE INTERNET FIRST CAME to our house in the early 1990s, so far as I could tell, the internet was inside of a box. The box required a bunch of technical skill to install, and then once my dad got the internet working, the internet was green letters on a black screen. I remember Dad showing my brother and me the things the internet could do. "Look," he would say. "The internet can show you what the weather is like right now in Beijing." Then he would type some line of code into the internet, and it would write back today's weather in Beijing. "Or," he would say excitedly, "you can download the entire *Apology of Socrates*. For free! And read it right here, in the house."²⁰

To my dad, this must have seemed like an actual miracle. But I was not a fan. For one thing, we couldn't get phone calls while my dad was online, on account of how the internet used the phone lines. Admittedly, fourteen-year-old me wasn't fielding a ton of calls, but still. More than that, it seemed to me that the internet was primarily a forum for talking about the internet—my dad would read (and tell us about) endless user

20. One of the weird solipsisms of American life, especially toward the end of the twentieth century, was that the news almost never talked about the weather outside of the United States unless there was some natural disaster unfolding. I guess I should also say that it is still kind of cool that you can download the *Apology of Socrates* for free on the internet.

manuals and message boards he'd read about how the internet worked, and what it might be able to do in the future, and so on.

One day Dad showed me that on the internet, you could talk to real people all over the world. He explained, "You can practice your French by going to a French forum," and he showed me how it worked. I messaged a couple people on the forum: "Comment ça va?" They responded in real time, with real French, which was unfortunate, as I didn't know much French. I started wondering if there might be an English-language version of the service, and it turned out there was. In fact, there was one built just for me: the CompuServe Teen Forum.

On the CompuServe Teen Forum, nobody knew anything about me. They didn't know that I was a miserable, cringingly awkward kid whose voice often creaked with nervousness. They didn't know I was late to puberty, and they didn't know the names people called me at school.

And paradoxically, because they didn't know me, they knew me far better than anyone in my real life. I remember one evening, in an instant message conversation, I told my CompuServe friend Marie about the "night feeling." The night feeling was my private name for the wave that crashed over me most school nights when I got into bed. My stomach would tighten and I'd feel the worry radiating out from my belly button. I'd never told anyone about the night feeling, and my heart was racing as I typed. Marie responded that she also knew the night feeling, and that she sometimes found comfort in listening quietly to her clock radio. I tried that, and it helped.

But most of the time, my Teen Forum friend group did not share our secrets. We shared inside jokes, and learned/built/borrowed/created together. By the summer of 1993, the CompuServe Teen Forum was a vast universe of mythology and references, from jokes about the TV show *Barney & Friends* to endless acronyms and abbreviations. The internet was still just green letters on a black screen, so we couldn't use images, but we arranged text characters into shapes. The idea of ASCII art, as it

is known, had been around for decades, but we hadn't been around for decades, and so we felt like we were discovering it as we built everything from extremely simple images—like :-:) for example—to ridiculously complex (and often obscene) ones. I don't recall using a word to describe what we were doing, but these days we would call this stuff memes.

That summer, with school out of the way, I was able to devote myself full-time to the Teen Forum. I even got something called an email address—a series of randomly generated digits (@compuserve.com). Back then, the internet charged by the hour, which became a real issue because I wanted to spend every hour on it. Now it was my parents who complained about the phone line being tied up. They loved that I was making friends, that I was writing and reading so much, but they could not afford a one-hundred-dollar monthly internet bill. At this point, a lifetime appeared when I was "hired" as a moderator for the Teen Forum. The payment came in the form of all the free internet I wanted, and I wanted a lot of it. CompuServe even paid for a separate phone line so I could be online constantly. If a single event in my life occurred outdoors that summer, I do not recall it.

I fear I've been romanticizing. The early-nineties internet had many of the problems the current internet does. While I recall the Teen Forum being well moderated, the same racism and misogyny that populate today's comments sections was prevalent thirty years ago. And then, as now, you could fall very far down the rabbit hole of the internet's highly personalized information feeds until conspiracy theories began to feel more real than the so-called facts.²¹

21. I lived this experience, actually. In the early nineties, I became entranced by something called the Phantom Time Hypothesis, which held that around three hundred years of time between the seventh and tenth centuries never actually happened and were instead invented by the Catholic Church. I was originally turned on to this idea by one of those memes that is itself not sure whether it's ironic. The conspiracy theory, which was pretty widespread at the time, held that I was really living not in the year 1993 but instead around 1698, and that a bunch of years had been faked so that the Church could . . . maintain power? The details of it escape me, but it's amazing what you can believe when you're down the rabbit hole.

I have wonderful memories of that summer, and also traumatic ones. A few years ago, I ran into an old friend, who said of our high school, "It saved my life. But it also did a lot of other things." So, too, with the internet.

These days, after drinking from the internet's fire hose for thirty years, I've begun to feel more of those negative effects. I don't know if it's my age, or the fact that the internet is no longer plugged into the wall and now travels with me everywhere I go, but I find myself thinking of that Wordsworth poem that begins, "The world is too much with us; late and soon."

What does it say that I can't imagine my life or my work without the internet? What does it mean to have my way of thinking, and my way of *being*, so profoundly shaped by machine logic? What does it mean that, having been part of the internet for so long, the internet is also part of me?

My friend Stan Muller tells me that when you're living in the middle of history, you never know what it means. I am living in the middle of the internet. I have no idea what it means.

I give the internet three stars.

ACADEMIC DECATHLON

BEGINNING IN TENTH GRADE, I attended a boarding school in Alabama, where my best friend, Todd, was also my roommate. He would often say that late at night, when he was trying to fall asleep in our air-conditionless dorm room, I turned into a stream-of-consciousness novel. I'd tell him everything—my every interaction with my English class crush, including selected quotations from the notes she and I exchanged; the reasons it just wasn't possible for me to turn in the paper I had due for history; the weird ache I always felt on the outside of my left knee; how nervous I'd been smoking a cigarette behind the gym because someone got caught there last week; and on and on and on until finally he would say, "Seriously, Green. I love you, but I have to sleep." We were not afraid to say "I love you" to each other.

Here's my favorite story about Todd: In those days, the SAT was offered only every other month in Alabama. Todd and I managed to miss the last local SAT test before our college application deadlines, so we had to drive to Georgia to take the test. After a road trip and a night in a Motel 6, we arrived bleary-eyed at the testing site, where I struggled to concentrate for four endless hours. When the test was at last over, I met back up with Todd. The first thing he said to me was, "What's

His throws from the outfield were phenomenally accurate—among the best in baseball. He would go on to play as a center fielder in the major leagues for six more years. Today, the most recent player to have won over ten games as a pitcher and hit over fifty home runs as a hitter is Rick Ankiel.

I give the yips one and a half stars.

AULD LANG SYNE

I FIND IT FASCINATING that in a world where so much is so new, we welcome a new year by singing "Auld Lang Syne," which is a very old song. The chorus starts out, "For auld lang syne, my Jo, for auld lang syne / We'll take a cup of kindness yet for auld lang syne." *Jo* is a Scots word that can be straightforwardly translated to "dear," but *auld lang syne* is more complicated. It literally means something like "old long since," but it's idiomatically akin to "the old times." We have a phrase in English somewhat similar to "for auld lang syne"—"for old times' sake."

Here's a bit of my old long since: In the summer of 2001, the writer Amy Krouse Rosenthal emailed *Booklist* magazine to inquire about a review. At the time, I was working for *Booklist* as a publishing assistant; most of my job was data entry, but I also answered many of the low-priority emails that came in. I responded to Amy with an update on the status of the review, and I also mentioned that on a personal note I loved her zine-like column in *Night* magazine. I told her I often thought about one snippet she'd written, which went, "Every time I'm flying and the captain announces the beginning of our descent, the same thing goes through my mind. While we're still pretty high above the city, I'll think, If the plane went down now, we would definitely not be OK."

A bit lower, and no, we still wouldn't be OK. But as we get real close to the ground, I'll relax. OK. We're low enough; if it crashed now, we might be OK."

She wrote me back the next day, and asked if I was a writer, and I said I was trying to be, and she asked if I had anything that was two minutes long that might work on the radio.

We don't really know when "Auld Lang Syne" was written. The first verse goes: "Should auld acquaintance be forgot / And never brought to mind? / Should auld acquaintance be forgot / And auld lang syne." Versions of those lyrics date back at least four hundred years, but we owe the current song to the great Scottish poet Robert Burns. In December of 1788, he wrote to his friend Frances Dunlop, "Is not the Scotch phrase 'Auld Lang Syne' exceedingly expressive? There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul. . . . Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment." On the back of the letter, Burns wrote a draft of the poem. At least three of the verses were probably his own, although he would later say of the song that he "took it down from an old man."

Part of what makes dating the first verse difficult is the poem's eternity: It's about drinking together and remembering old times, and almost every idea in the song—from picking daisies to wandering through fields to toasting old friends over a beer—could've been written five hundred, a thousand, or even three thousand years ago.

It is also, incidentally, a rousing ode to splitting the check, with part of the second verse going, "And surely you'll buy your pint cup and surely I'll buy mine." But mostly, the song is just an unapologetic celebration of the good old days.

I guess I should tell you that Amy is dead. Otherwise, her death within this review might seem like some kind of narrative device, which I don't want. So, okay. She is dead. The rare present tense sentence that, once it becomes true, stays true forever.

But we are not there yet. We were still in the past, I think. Amy asked if I had anything for the radio, and I sent her three mini essays, and she liked one of them, and asked me to come in and record it for her show on Chicago's public radio station, WBEZ. After that, Amy invited me to be on her show more often. Within a year, I was recording frequent commentaries for WBEZ, and then for NPR's *All Things Considered*.

In April of 2002, Amy convened some of her writer and musician friends for an event at the Chopin Theatre in Chicago called Writers' Block Party. She asked me to read for it, and I did, and people laughed at my dumb jokes. Amy hired someone to walk around the theater giving everyone compliments, and the complimenter said they liked my shoes, which were new Adidas sneakers, and that's why I have worn Adidas sneakers nearly every day for the last nineteen years.

Robert Burns originally had a different tune in mind for "Auld Lang Syne" than the one most of us know, and although he himself realized the melody was "mediocre," you will sometimes still hear that original arrangement.²⁷ The tune most associated with "Auld Lang Syne" first appeared in 1799 in George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice*.

By then, Robert Burns was gone. He was only thirty-seven when he died of a heart condition (possibly exacerbated by his habit of raising many a pint glass to old acquaintances). In his last letter, he wrote to his friend Frances Dunlop, "An illness which has long hung about me in all

27. It is used, for example, in the 2008 film *Sex and the City*.

probability will speedily send me beyond that bourne whence no traveler returns." Even on his deathbed, Burns could turn a phrase.

Within a few decades of Burns's death, "Auld Lang Syne" had become a popular part of New Year's Eve celebrations in Scotland, a holiday known as Hogmanay that can trace its history back to winter solstice rituals. By 1818, Beethoven had written an arrangement of the song, and it was beginning to travel throughout the world.

Between 1945 and 1948, the tune was used in South Korea's national anthem. In the Netherlands, its melody inspired one of the country's most famous football chants. "Auld Lang Syne" is often played at Japanese department stores just before they close to let customers know it's time to leave. The song is also a staple of film soundtracks, from Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* in 1925 to *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1946 to *Mimions* in 2015.

I think "Auld Lang Syne" is popular in Hollywood not just because it's in the public domain and therefore cheap, but also because it's the rare song that is genuinely wistful—it acknowledges human longing without romanticizing it, and it captures how each new year is a product of all the old ones. When I sing "Auld Lang Syne" on New Year's Eve, I forget the words like most of us do, until I get to the fourth verse, which I do have memorized: "We two have paddled in the stream, from morning sun till dine / but seas between us broad have roared since Auld Lang Syne."

And I think about the many broad seas that have roared between me and the past—seas of neglect, seas of time, seas of death. I'll never again speak to many of the people who loved me into this moment, just as you will never speak to many of the people who loved you into your now. So we raise a glass to them—and hope that perhaps somewhere, they are raising a glass to us.

In 2005, Amy published a memoir in the form of an encyclopedia called *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*. That book ends, "I was here, you see. I was." Another sentence that once it becomes true, never stops being true. Her *Encyclopedia* came out just a few months before my first novel, *Looking for Alaska*. Soon thereafter, Sarah got into graduate school at Columbia and so we moved to New York. Amy and I stayed in touch and collaborated occasionally over the next decade—I played a bit part in an experience she curated for hundreds of people on August 8, 2008, in Chicago's Millennium Park—but it was never again like it had been in those early days.

In her strange and beautiful interactive memoir *Textbook Amy Krouse Rosenthal*, published in 2016, she wrote, "If one is generously contracted 80 years, that amounts to 29,220 days on Earth. Playing that out, how many times then, really, do I get to look at a tree? 12,395? There has to be an exact number. Let's just say it is 12,395. Absolutely, that is a lot, but it is not infinite, and anything less than infinite seems too measly a number and is not satisfactory." In her writing, Amy often sought to reconcile the infinite nature of consciousness and love and yearning with the finite nature of the universe and all that inhabits it. Toward the end of *Textbook*, she wrote a multiple-choice question: "In the alley, there is a bright pink flower peeking out through the asphalt. A. It looks like fertility. B. It looks like hope." For me at least, "Auld Lang Syne" captures exactly what it feels like to see a bright pink flower peeking out through the asphalt, and how it feels to know you have 12,395 times to look at a tree.

Amy found out she had cancer not long after finishing *Textbook*, and she called me. She knew that in the years after my book *The Fault in Our Stars* was published, I'd come to know many young people who were gravely ill, and she wanted to know if I had advice for her. I told her what I think is true—that love survives death. But she wanted to know how young people react to death. How her kids would. She wanted to

know if her kids and her husband would be okay, and that ripped me up. Although I'm usually quite comfortable talking with sick people, with my friend I found myself stumbling over words, overwhelmed by my own sadness and worry.

They won't be okay, of course, but they will go on, and the love you poured into them will go on. That's what I should've said. But what I actually said, while crying, was, "How can this be happening? You do so much yoga."

In my experience, dying people often have wonderful stories of the horrible things healthy people say to them, but I've never heard of anybody saying something as stupid as, "You do so much yoga." I hope that Amy at least got some narrative mileage out of it. But I also know I failed her, after she was there for me so many times. I know she forgives me—present tense—but still, I desperately wish I could've said something useful. Or perhaps not said anything at all. When people we love are suffering, we want to make it better. But sometimes—often, in fact—you can't make it better. I'm reminded of something my supervisor said to me when I was a student chaplain: "Don't just do something. Stand there."

"Auld Lang Syne" was a popular song during World War I—versions of it were sung in trenches not just by British soldiers, but by French and German and Austrian ones as well, and the song even played a small role in one of the strangest and most beautiful moments in world history, the Christmas Truce of 1914.

On Christmas Eve that year, along part of the war's Western Front in Belgium, around one hundred thousand British and German troops emerged from their trenches and met one another in the so-called no-man's-land between front lines. Nineteen-year-old Henry Williamson wrote his mother, "Yesterday the British and Germans met and shook

hands in the ground between the trenches and exchanged souvenirs . . . Marvellous, isn't it?" A German soldier remembered that a British soldier "brought a soccer ball from their trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was." Elsewhere on the front, Captain Sir Edward Hulse recalled a Christmas sing-along that "ended up with 'Auld Lang Syne' which we all, English, Scots, Irish, Prussians, Wuttenbergers, etc., joined in. It was absolutely astounding, and if I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked."

Hulse, who was twenty-five years old at the time, would be killed on the Western Front less than four months later. At least seventeen million people would die as a direct result of the war—more than half the current population of Canada. By Christmas of 1916, soldiers didn't want truces—the devastating losses of the war, and the growing use of poison gas, had embittered the combatants. But many also had no idea why they were fighting and dying for tiny patches of ground so far from home. In the British trenches, soldiers began to sing the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" with different words: "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here."

Here was a world without whys, where life was meaninglessness all the way down. Modernity had come to war, and to the rest of life. The art critic Robert Hughes once referred to the "peculiarly modernist Hell of repetition," and the trenches of World War I were hell indeed.

Although she was a playful and optimistic writer, Amy was not deluded about the nature of suffering, or about its centrality in human life. Her work—whether picture book or memoir—always finds a way to acknowledge misery without giving in to it. One of the last lines she ever wrote was, "Death may be knocking on my door, but I'm not getting out of this glorious bath to answer it."

In her public appearances, Amy would sometimes use that recursive lament of British soldiers and transform it without ever changing the tune or the words. She would ask an audience to sing that song with her: "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here." And although it's a profoundly nihilistic song written about the modernist hell of repetition, singing this song with Amy, I could always see the hope in it. It became a statement that *we* are here—meaning that we are together, and not alone. And it's also a statement that *we are*, that we exist. And it's a statement that we are *here*, that a series of astonishing unlikelyhoods has made us possible and here possible. We might never know why we are here, but we can still proclaim in hope *that* we are here. I don't think such hope is foolish or idealistic or misguided.

We live in hope—that life will get better, and more importantly that it will go on, that love will survive even though we will not. And between now and then, we are here because we're here because we're here because we're here.

I give auld lang syne five stars.

GOOGLING STRANGERS

WHEN I WAS A KID, my mother often told me that everyone has a gift inside them. You might be an extraordinarily astute listener of smooth jazz, or a defensive midfielder with an uncommon understanding of how to open up space with the perfect pass. But as a child, I always felt like I had no inborn gift. I wasn't a particularly good student, and I had no athletic ability. I couldn't read social cues. I sucked at piano, karate, ballet dancing, and everything else my parents tried to sign me up for. I thought of myself as a person without a specialty.

But as it turned out, my specialty just hadn't been invented yet, because I am—please forgive the lack of modesty here—really, really good at googling strangers. Sure, I've put in the work—Malcolm Gladwell famously said it takes ten thousand hours to become an expert in a field; I've clocked my ten thousand hours, and then some. But also, I just have a knack for it.

I google strangers almost every day. If my wife and I have to attend a party—and I say *have to* because that is my relationship with parties²⁸—I usually research all the known attendees in advance. Of course, I know it's weird when a stranger tells you they are in the carpet installation

28. Yes, even in 2021.

business and you answer, "Oh yeah, I am aware. Also, you met your wife in 1981, when you were both working at the same savings and loan institution in Dallas. She was living at home with her parents, Joseph and Marilyn, at least according to census records, while you had recently graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University. Your wedding reception at the Dallas Museum of Art was right next to that Dale Chihuly sculpture, *Hart Window*. Then you moved to Indianapolis for your wife's job at Eli Lilly. How is the carpet business these days? Do you guys have, like, a rivalry with hardwood floor people?"

It's horrifying, how much information can be accessed via Google about almost all of us. Of course, this loss of privacy has come with tremendous benefits—free storage of photos and video, a chance to participate in large-scale discourse via social media, and the opportunity to easily keep in touch with friends from long ago.

But giving so much of our selves to private corporations like Google makes other people feel comfortable sharing their selves. This feedback loop—we all want to be on Facebook because everyone else is on Facebook—has led to me making so much of my life publicly available that when creating accounts on new social media platforms, I often struggle to find security questions that can't be answered by studying my old social media accounts. Where did I go to elementary school? That's easy enough to find out. What was the name of my first dog? I've vlogged about our miniature dachshund Red Green. Who was your childhood best friend? You'll find baby pictures of us tagged together on Facebook. What was your mother's maiden name? You can't be serious.

But even though less of our lives belong to us and more of our lives belong to the companies that host and gather our browsing habits and hobbies and keystrokes, even though I am revolted by how easy it has become to scroll through the lives of the living and the dead, even though it all feels a bit too much like an Orwell novel . . . I can't outright condemn the googling of strangers.

When I was twenty-two and working as a student chaplain at a children's hospital, I would spend twenty-four hours on call once or twice a week. This meant that I'd stay in the hospital with two beepers. One beeper went off whenever someone asked for a chaplain. The other buzzed when a serious trauma case arrived at the hospital. One of my last nights on call, toward the end of my six-month chaplaincy, I was asleep in the pastoral care office when the trauma pager sent me down to the Emergency Department. A three-year-old child was being wheeled in. He'd suffered severe burns.

I'm not sure whether it's even possible to talk about the suffering of others without exploiting that suffering, whether you can write about pain without glorifying or ennobling or degrading it. Teju Cole once said that "a photograph can't help tanning what it shows," and I worry the same might be true of language. Stories have to make sense, and nothing at the hospital made any sense to me at all, which is one of the reasons I've rarely written about my time there directly. I don't know the proper way through this morass, and I never have, but in telling this story, I've chosen to obscure and alter certain details. The important thing is that despite the severity of his injury, the child was conscious, and in terrible pain.

Although I'd been around the Emergency Department for months, and seen all manner of suffering and death, I'd never seen the trauma team so visibly upset. The anguish was overwhelming—the smell of the burns, the piercing screams that accompanied this little boy's every exhalation. Someone shouted, "CHAPLAIN! THE SCISSORS BEHIND YOU!" and in a daze I brought them the scissors. Someone shouted, "CHAPLAIN! THE PARENTS!" And I realized that next to me the little boy's parents were screaming, trying to get at their kid, but the doctors and paramedics and nurses needed enough space to work, so I had to ask the parents to step back.

Next thing I knew I was in the windowless family room in the Emergency Department, the room where they put you on the worst night of your life. It was quiet except for the crying of the couple across from me. They sat on opposite sides of the couch, elbows on knees.

During my training they told me that half of marriages end within a couple years of losing a child. Weakly, I asked the parents if they wanted to pray. The woman shook her head no. The doctor came in and said that the kid was in critical condition. The parents only had one question, and it was one the doctor couldn't answer. "We'll do everything we can," she said, "but your son may not survive." Both the parents collapsed, not against each other, but into themselves.

We are able to navigate the world knowing these things happen. My chaplaincy supervisor once told me, "Children have always died. It is natural." That may be true, but I can't accept it. I couldn't accept it sitting in the windowless family room, and I can't accept it now, as a father myself.

When the kid finally went upstairs to the ICU and his parents followed, I walked to the break room to get a cup of coffee, and the doctor was in there, her face hovering over a trash can that she'd been vomiting into. "I'm sorry," I said. "You did good with them. Thanks for being kind to them. I think it helped." She dry heaved for a while and then said, "That kid's gonna die and I know his last words. I know the last thing he'll ever say." I didn't ask her to tell me what it was, and she didn't volunteer.

A week later, I finished the chaplaincy program, and decided not to go to divinity school. I told everyone it was because I didn't want to learn Greek, which was true, but it was also true that I couldn't cope with the memory of this kid. I still can't cope with it. I thought about him every day. I prayed for him every day, even after I stopped praying about anything else. Every night, still, I say his name and ask God for

mercy. Whether I believe in God isn't really relevant. I do believe, however tenuously, in mercy.

As an inveterate googler, I knew I could have just looked up his name, but I was too scared. To google would have been to know, one way or another. I'm reminded of that great line from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*: "The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him."

The months of not knowing became years, then more than a decade. And then one morning not long ago, I typed the kid's name into the search bar. It's an unusual name, easy pickings for Google. I hit enter. The first link was to a Facebook. I clicked over, and there he was. Eighteen years old, a decade and a half removed from the one night we spent together.

He is alive.

He is growing up, finding his way in the world, documenting a life that is more public than he probably realizes. But how can I not be grateful for knowing, even if the only way to know is to lose our autonomy over our so-called selves? He is alive. He likes John Deere tractors, and is a member of the Future Farmers of America, and he is alive. Scrolling through his friends, I find his parents' profiles, and discover that they are still married. He is alive. He likes terrible, overly manufactured country music. He is alive. He calls his girlfriend his bae. Alive. Alive. Alive.

It could've gone the other way, of course. But it didn't. And so I can't help but give the practice of googling strangers four stars.