

# ORIGINS



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When you split a rock to find a fossil, you get two for the price of one—the fossil itself (called the part) and the impression of the organism forced into layers above (called the counterpart)—thumb and thumbprint, if you will. The part, as the actual fossil, has been favored by scientists and collectors; the counterpart, as an impression, has less to offer in traditional evaluations.

—Stephen Jay Gould

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JOGGINS, NOVA SCOTIA

captured, a baked impression,  
Braille signatures of prehistoric chance

a vacant eye socket's stamped rim,  
that extinguished, basalt stare,  
permanently and unknowingly echoes  
the stretched holes  
of a thumbnail pelvis

discards piled  
on this crowded  
dressing room floor

each unlikely and insistent fossil  
rides a seam of rock more unruly  
than Li Po's drunken river

jawbones, skeletons, entire ecosystems  
exhumed by the ceaseless strike  
and slip of nudged rock.  
identical and itinerant ochre bands  
and ecru folds unfurl under the same sun  
at Joggins and Morocco

dislodging single fossils on one beach,  
whole books on another

## ON THE ORIGIN OF THE ORIGIN

the big change  
wasn't just a tiny  
lungful of muggy, Paleozoic air

or scurrying wet-flipperped  
on once leafy beaches.

not even eating  
above the murky waterline  
cornered the days

genuine change  
manifests in the bedroom.  
the marshes, those nurseries  
cradled eggs  
virgin to air

that cowering, ecstatic  
amphibian rut  
sliding into veins

of eternal rock

CHARLES DARWIN

*If I were to give an award for the single best idea  
anyone has ever had, I'd give it to Darwin.*  
—Daniel Dennett

only ever “Charles” despite your letting  
the species come of age.  
fine but c'mon: Sir Elton. Sir Mick.

merely God's assassin. collaring  
cop for the manicured  
thieving hands of the church

undeniably dedicated, your young  
beetle hunts so consuming  
you once had three to grab  
so popped the third  
in your mouth.  
a Cambridge undergraduate teased in letters  
by gentlewomen who sought a bachelor  
not a bug collector

*No poet ever felt more delighted at seeing  
his first poem published than I did at seeing,  
in Stephen's Illustrations of British Insects,  
the magic words, 'Captured by C. Darwin, Esq.'*

not just a beetle but a silver spoon  
in your mouth,  
your father's bank account  
the wind in your Beagle sails



fortunate and far from infallible  
in fact you didn't distinguish the famous  
Galapagos finches, simply sent them home  
to the colleague who could

acquisitive, industrious then contemplative,  
birds, fossils and reptiles  
hunted and gathered  
on a two-year voyage stretched to five,  
your (shared) cabin smaller  
than a prison cell.  
your rows of books ultimately  
doubled the walls

after brief London and marriage  
a quick retreat to a quiet village.  
your notebooks, your specimens,  
surveys for local livestock breeders.  
no tool more valuable than the path,  
you had cut for daily contemplation,  
natural selection recollected in tranquillity.  
the stroll and the daily post,  
global letters, inscribed books from Marx

unbelievably you hatched your theory  
then shelved the manuscript  
for lesser science: barnacles, worms,  
the facial expressions of your children  
(those who survived).  
fifteen years of small change and meals  
with your loving, pious wife

instead of publication

*it is like confessing a murder*

this child of Malthus

wouldn't have published without fear  
of being scooped by Wallace.

in the face of competition

the man who never wrote

*the survival of the fittest*

finally raced to survive

## THE BURGESS SHALE

Canada's Elgin Marbles our Stones of Destiny,  
80,000 fossil-rich BC rocks,  
a burden for saddle bag and packing crate,  
boxcars spiralling to another country,  
the Smithsonian and dusty time. seven decades limped  
between the mountainside find  
and paper findings that forced evolution  
to evolve. a shale-pressed  
trick pad for a paradigm shift

British Columbia and Nova Scotia,  
bookends to this Canadian fiction  
carried the two most revelatory  
evolutionary sites on the planet,  
left and right thumbprints of Life.  
Joggins the land-nested egg and Burgess,  
200-million years earlier, anatomy's orgy  
in a costume shop, a junkyard  
welder's underwater after party.  
*Hallucigenia*, a bushy moustache crossbred  
with an alien worm, seven pairs of legs  
beneath seven antenaed something.  
the mouth of yesterday's *Anomalocaris nathorsti*  
is today's throbbing jellyfish

entire categories of extinct species  
once swam at Burgess,  
their compressed fossils  
pages in today's pop-up books,  
orphaned grandparents.  
species and ideas squeezed to extinction

in a marine grotto drained  
then buried a thousand times.  
unrecognizable dried fruit  
tucked high on a mountain shelf  
for more than 10% of Earth's history

mountainside scrapbook of life's youth,  
long-haired days so wild  
that evolution's progressive line  
had to be abandoned,  
its infinite ladder tipped  
from the castle walls of known thought.  
a single quarry's crowded refutation  
of junk DNA, our wisdom teeth and appendices  
not evolutionary residue, but potential.  
given world enough and time

Burgess, the warehouse of body parts  
from which all evolved, an online store  
shipping across the millennia, slashing  
prices and preconceptions, forced evolution  
to become an elimination of design,  
not an expansion, a slimming program  
for this phantasmagoria of mouths,  
floating cones of teeth or  
concentric rings of incisors and legs.  
flower-shaped *Dinomischus*, with its abutting  
anus and mouth (those separated twins)  
as neat and proximate  
as the dual centres of a six-pack.  
each mouth full-throated for a chorus

(the opposite of the sirens' song)  
echoing the arc and whim  
of evolution, its gleaming pinball  
flipped from one surviving species  
to bump off another.  
contingency  
lighting up the mountain board

BAY OF FUNDY

a busy mouth  
to many lovers,  
the profound Portuguese  
    *Rio Fondo*  
    deep river,  
or the throaty French *fendu*, split  
for the epiglottal, dog-legging Cape Split

the top jaw of New Brunswick and  
Nova Scotia its grinding bottom.  
the bite insatiable, the roar insistent,  
clapping off the red  
tonsils of Capes Chignecto and d'Or

Chignecto Bay and the Minas Basin  
(that chicken crossing the bay)  
diverge like a swimmer's legs  
kicking 115 billion  
tonnes of salt water a day.  
the deepest, wettest  
French kiss on the planet

## THE COTTAGE

architectural and geographic bigamy,  
the second draft or spouse,  
a little more wilderness  
around (and under) your roof

you carry a different passport  
for each province and still  
busy mice find you  
sniffing under your  
*noms de guerre:*

*cabin* out west  
*cottage* for the Ontario coin  
*chalet in la belle province*  
*camp* in the Maritimes

a different county  
but the customs  
of a different country.  
chipped furniture, chairs  
freckled with orphaned paint.  
Spartan cupboards house  
food of alarming longevity.  
the dusty and otherwise unthinkable  
instant coffee of emergencies,  
forgotten fishing plans or Oilmageddon.  
clothes so dated  
fashion is a soft museum

custom also shifts.  
the lunch beer, Sunday afternoon  
wine at midweek

and that most elastic of drinks,  
the lovable tonic and gin,  
cleansing and bright at any hour.  
every afternoon a book

a second home  
and a second marriage  
are usually cheaper  
    pensions get halved  
    not quartered  
a little derelict  
but comfortable,  
soul enriching, the air  
cleaner the sleep more pure  
for the fiction  
of home and  
home again