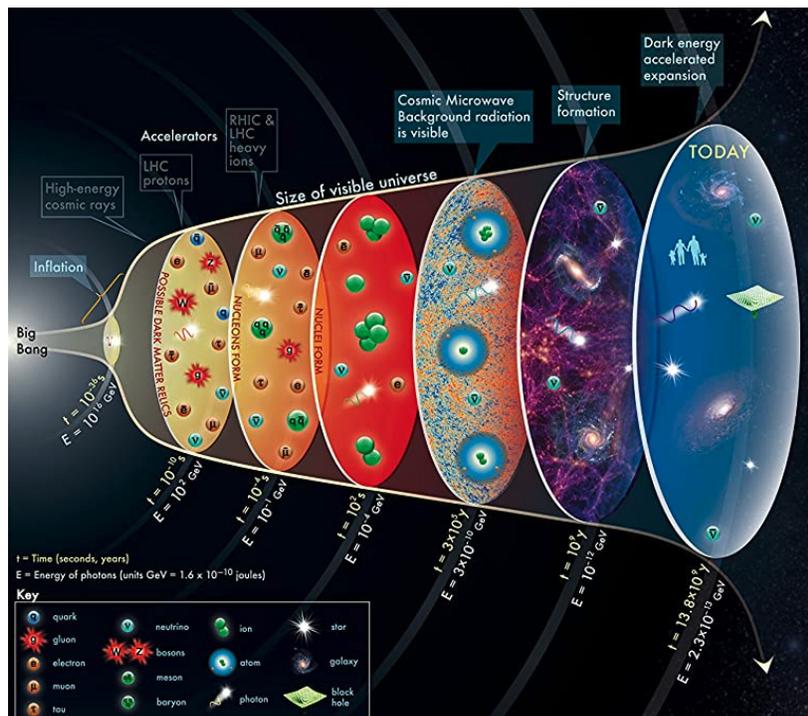


tumble
in
the *semi-dark*

I like how the very first line of the discourse establishes that the exhibit has something to do with Time. How it then goes on to add that, as much as forces exert invisibly across space, there is an admission of blindness in the phrase “one thing leads to another”. That the present is a game of watching a very long stack of dominoes tumble in the semi-dark, that we are reading the book of events by selective page-turning. I can practically see the text winking as it says “weight of history”, as if to remind me that weight is technically a force. That is the exact moment I sense a vague feeling of being trapped in time, as if some unseen hand is keeping me imprisoned in this particular sequence of sentences.



We are then dropped abruptly into an image of the Very Beginning. We bump up against this cartoon—a visual aid, we are told—depicting the key epochs of the universe. Then we are asked to contemplate how the infant universe, fresh from its Big Bang moment, kept expanding and thus cooling—from unspeakably infernal to merely feverish. It is surprising yet reasonable to learn that this refrigeration is what allowed hot particles to stick together to form hydrogen and helium nuclei in the First hundred seconds. Also that, half a million years later, atoms were born when electrons were

allowed to stick with nuclei. When we are told how that event turned the universe from a milky opaque fog to the transparent void we see today, it has me think: *Everything was literally invisible for the first half a million years?* And then we encounter dark matter—its ubiquity, its making up five-sixths of all the matter ever, its concealed presence revealed only by its gravitational tug—just as we are introduced to its role in the growing up of the cosmos. For it is dark matter, we learn, that pulled in hot plasma trying to flow out, making dense knots of matter that would go on to seed the formation of galaxies. I’m thinking there’s all sorts of invisible that went into making us.

Maybe it's just me, but as my eyes now wander to the exhibit, the fabric layers seem to reflect the cosmological epochs. Maybe it is all a symbol of movement from the past through the present to the future, now that I see the banyan roots of beaded fringe emerge from the one and blend into the other in a floral pattern. It gives me a strong sense of death, that flower. I love how there's tension everywhere keeping things intact, in the threads, in the very structure of the

sculpture. What I really like about the exposed metal is the rusty parts, like a reminder that the sculpture is still evolving in front of me.

Then there's the fabric itself, which we are told is made of the traditional materials of silk and cotton. Were they really made in India and bought in Pakistan? I get the sentiment that some traditions can travel to places and times that people can't. Now that I'm squinting closely, I see the pattern going in and out of focus... and that reminds me of historic repetition, how some things inevitably appear and disappear and appear and disappear.

As I come back to the text I find Emily Dickinson and Jane Austen and Ada Lovelace waiting for me. Probably as a metaphor for influential work done in obscurity by singularly brilliant minds attached to female flesh, probably to speak for all the countless others across the centuries who have vanished from the record. There is also that diversion I enjoy, the one about how artists and scientists were not distinguished in the Renaissance era.

It is the last paragraph that stays with me the most. Not the part that says the future is always invisible despite our constant exertion of forces on it — though that's good too — but the part following that. At first, the phrase, *we are in a special moment of light and visibility*, puzzles me. But then I read on that the stars will cease to shine in a hundred trillion years, and all that'd ever be left is a dark graveyard of black holes and balls of nuclear ash. When we are gently reminded of the opaqueness of creation in the first half-million years, it all makes me grateful to be here, at $t = 13.7$ billion years, sandwiched between two eras of invisibility.

It isn't lost on me that, for all the myriads of comings and goings that's gone before, as far as the universe is concerned we are still at the Beginning... Nirmal Raj

tumble

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