

AXIS

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON



THE FIREWORKS OF GOD

The crowd on the patio began to react to the meteor shower. Lise looked up as three scaldingly-bright white lines scribed across the meridian. The meteors emanated from a point well above the horizon and almost directly due east, and before she could look away there were more of them—two, then one, then a spectacular cluster of five.

She was reminded of a summer in Idaho when she had gone stargazing with her father—she couldn't have been more than ten years old. There had been meteors that night, dozens of them, the largest intercepted by the invisible barrier that protected the Earth from the swollen sun, the smallest incinerated in the atmosphere. She had watched them arc across the heavens with a speed and brilliance that left her breathless.

As now. The fireworks of God. “Wow,” she said, lamely.

“It's just dust,” Turk said, “or that's what the astronomers say. What's left of some old comet.”

But something new had caught her attention. “So what about that?” she asked, pointing east, lower on the horizon, where the dark sky met the darker sea. It looked to Lise like something was actually falling out there—not meteors but bright dots that hung in the air like flares, or what she imagined flares would look like. The reflected light of them colored the ocean a streaky orange. She didn't remember anything like that from her previous time in Equatoria. “Is that part of it?”

Turk stood up. So did a few others among the crowd on the patio. A puzzled hush displaced the talk and laughter.

“No,” Turk said. “That's not part of it.”

**By Robert Charles Wilson
from Tom Doherty Associates**

A Hidden Place

Darwinia

Bios

The Perseids and Other Stories

The Chronoliths

Blind Lake

Spin

Axis

AXIS

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON



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*Dedicated to the memory of
Dr. Albert Goldhar and Ella
Beautone (Bootie) Goldhar,
and to the family they created
and into which they generously
accepted me.*

*It is necessary that things
should pass away into that
from which they are born. For
things must pay one another
the penalty and compensation
for their injustice according to
the ordinance of time.*

—Anaximander

PART ONE

**THE
34TH OF
AUGUST**

CHAPTER ONE

In the summer of his twelfth year—the summer the stars began to fall from the sky—the boy Isaac discovered that he could tell east from west with his eyes closed.

Isaac lived at the edge of the Great Inland Desert, on the continent of Equatoria, on the planet that had been appended to the Earth by the inscrutable beings called the Hypotheticals. People had given the planet a whole panoply of grandiose or mythological or coolly scientific names, but most simply called it the New World, in any of a hundred or more languages, or Equatoria, after its most widely settled continent. These were things Isaac had learned in what passed for school.

He lived in a compound of brick and adobe, far from the nearest town. He was the only child at the settlement. The adults with whom he lived preferred to keep a careful distance between themselves and the rest of the world. They were special, in ways they were reluctant to discuss. Isaac, too, was special. They had told him so, many times. But he wasn't sure he believed them. He didn't feel special. Often he felt much less than special.

Occasionally the adults, especially Dr. Dvali or Mrs. Rebka, asked Isaac whether he was lonely. He wasn't. He had books, he had the video library to fill his time. He was a student, and he learned at his own pace—steadily if not quickly. In this, Isaac suspected, he was a disappointment to his keepers. But the books and videos and lessons filled his time, and when they were unavailable there was the natural world around him, which had become a kind of mute, indifferent friend: the mountains, gray and green and brown, sloping down to this arid plain, the edge of the desert hinterland, a curdled landscape of rock and sand. Few things grew here, since the rain came only in the first months of spring and sparsely even then. In the dry washes there were lumpish plants with prosaic names: barrel cucumbers, leather vines. In the courtyard of the compound a native garden had been planted, cactus feathery with purple flowers, tall nevergreens with weblike blossoms that extracted moisture from the air. Sometimes a man named Raj irrigated the garden from a pump that ran deep into the earth, and on those mornings the air smelled of mineral-rich water: a steely scent that carried for kilometers. On watering day, rock shrews would burrow under the fence and tumble comically across the tiled courtyard.

Isaac's days passed in gentle sameness early in the summer of his twelfth year, as his days had always passed, but that sleepy peace came to an end the day the old woman arrived.

She came, remarkably, on foot.

Isaac had left the compound that afternoon and climbed a small distance up the foothills, to a granite shelf that jutted from the slope of a ridge like a ship's prow from a pebbly sea. The afternoon sun had warmed the rock to a fine, fierce heat. Isaac, with his wide-brimmed hat and white cotton shirt to protect him from the burning light, sat under the lip of the ridge where there was still shade, watching the horizon. The desert rippled in rising waves of furnace air. He was alone and motionless—afloat in heat, a castaway on a sere raft of stone—when the woman appeared. At first she was just a dot down the unpaved road that led from the distant towns where Isaac's keepers went to buy food and supplies. She moved slowly, or seemed to. Nearly an hour passed before he could identify her as a woman—then an old woman—then an old woman with a pack on her back, a bow-legged posture, and a dogged, determined stride. She wore a white robe and a white sun hat.

The road passed close to this rock, almost directly beneath it, and Isaac, who didn't want to be seen, though he could not say why, scooted behind a boulder and crouched there as she approached. He closed his eyes and imagined he felt the bulk and weight of the land beneath him, the old woman's two feet tickling the skin of the desert like a beetle on the body of a slumbering giant. (And he felt another presence, deep in that earth, a quiescent behemoth stirring in its long sleep far to the west. . . .)

The old woman paused beneath the shelf of rock as if she could see him in his hiding place. Isaac was aware of the break in the rhythm of her shuffling steps. Or maybe she had innocently paused to sip water from a canteen. She said nothing. Isaac held himself very still, something he was good at.

Then her steps resumed. She walked on, leaving the road where a trail bent toward the compound. Isaac lifted his head and looked after her. She was many meters away now, the long light of the afternoon drawing her shadow alongside her like a leggy caricature. As soon as he saw her she paused and turned back, and for a moment it seemed as if their eyes met, and Isaac hastily ducked away, uncertain whether he had been seen. He was startled by the accuracy of her gaze and he remained hidden for a long time, until the sunlight angled deep into the mountain passes. He hid even from himself, quiet as a fish in a pool of memory and thought.

The old woman reached the compound's gates and went inside and stayed there. Before the sky grew wholly dark, Isaac followed her. He wondered if he would be introduced to the woman, perhaps at dinner.

Very few outsiders came to the compound. Of those who came, most came to stay.

After Isaac had bathed and put on clean clothes he went to the dining room.

This was where the entire community, all thirty of the adults, gathered every evening. Morning and afternoon meals were impromptu, could be taken at any time as long as you were willing to do your own work in the kitchen, but dinner was a collective effort, always crowded, inevitably noisy.

Usually Isaac enjoyed hearing the adults talk among themselves, though he seldom understood what they said unless it was trivial: whose turn it was to go to town for provisions, how a roof might be repaired or a well improved. More often, since the

adults were mainly scientists and theoreticians, their talk turned to abstract matters. Listening, Isaac had retained few of the details of their work but something of its general content. There was always talk of time and stars and the Hypotheticals, of technology and biology, of evolution and transformation. Although these conversations usually pivoted on words he couldn't understand, they had a fine and lofty sound about them. The debates—were the Hypotheticals properly called *beings*, conscious entities, or were they some vast and mindless *process*?—often grew heated, philosophies defended and attacked like military objectives. It was as if in some nearby but inaccessible room the universe itself was being taken apart and reassembled.

Tonight the murmur was subdued. There was a newcomer present: the old woman from the road. Isaac, bashfully taking a seat between Dr. Dvali and Mrs. Rebka, cast furtive glances at her. She did not return them; in fact she seemed indifferent to his presence at the table. When the opportunity arose, Isaac studied her face.

She was even older than he had guessed. Her skin was dark and skeined with wrinkles. Her eyes, bright and liquid, peered out from skully chambers. She held her knife and fork in long, fragile fingers. Her palms were pale. She had changed out of her desert garb into clothing more like what the other adults wore: jeans and a pale yellow cotton shirt. Her hair was thin and cut close to the scalp. She wore no rings or necklaces. In the crook of one elbow was a patch of cotton held down with surgical tape: Mrs. Rebka, the community physician, must already have taken a blood sample from her. But that happened to every newcomer. Isaac wondered if Mrs. Rebka had had a hard time finding a vein in that small sinewy arm. He wondered what the blood test had been meant to detect, and whether Mrs. Rebka had found what she was looking for.

No special attention was paid to the newcomer at dinner. She joined in conversation but the talk remained superficial, as if no one wanted to give away any secrets before the stranger was fully approved, absorbed, understood. It was not until the dishes had been cleared and several pots of coffee placed on the long table that Dr. Dvali introduced Isaac to her.

“Isaac,” he began, and the boy gazed at the tabletop uncomfortably, “this is Sulean Moi—she’s come a long way to meet you.”

A long way? What did that mean? And—to meet *him*?

“Hello, Isaac,” the newcomer said. Her voice was not the harsh croak he had expected. In fact her voice was mellifluous despite a certain grit . . . and, in some way he could not pin down, *familiar*.

“Hello,” he said, still avoiding her eyes.

“Please call me Sulean,” she said.

He nodded cautiously.

“I hope we’ll be friends,” she said.

He did not, of course, tell her immediately about his newfound ability to distinguish the points of the compass with his eyes closed. He hadn't told anyone about that, not even stern Dr. Dvali or the more sympathetic Mrs. Rebka. He was afraid of the scrutiny it would bring.

Sulean Moi, who moved into the compound, made a point of visiting him every morning after classes and before lunch. At first Isaac dreaded these visits. He was shy and not a little frightened of Sulean's great age and apparent frailty. But she was steadily, courteously friendly. She respected his silences, and the questions she asked were seldom awkward or intrusive.

"Do you like your room?" she asked one day.

Because he preferred to be alone he had been given this room to himself, a small but uncluttered chamber on the second story of the easternmost wing of the largest house. There was a window overlooking the desert, and Isaac had put his desk and chair in front of that window, his bed against the farther wall. He liked to keep the shutters open at night, to let the dry wind touch the bedsheets, his skin. He liked the smell of the desert.

"I grew up in a desert," Sulean told him. A slant of sunlight through the window illuminated her left side, one arm and the parchment of her cheek and ear. Her voice was almost a whisper.

"This desert?"

"No, not this one. But one not very different."

"Why did you leave?"

She smiled. "I had places to go. Or at least I thought I did."

"And this is where you came?"

"Ultimately. Yes."

Because he liked her, and because he could not help being aware of what was unspoken between them, Isaac said, "I don't have anything to give you."

"I don't expect anything," she said.

"The others do."

"Do they?"

"Dr. Dvali and the rest. They used to ask me a lot of questions—how I felt, and what ideas I had, and what things in books meant. But they didn't like my answers." Eventually they had stopped asking, just as they had stopped giving him blood tests, psychological tests, perception tests.

"I'm perfectly satisfied with you the way you are," the old woman said.

He wanted to believe her. But she was new, she had walked through the desert with the nonchalance of an insect on a sunny rock, her purposes were vague, and Isaac was still reluctant to share his most troublesome secrets.

All the adults were his teachers, though some were more patient or attentive than others. Mrs. Rebka taught him basic biology, Ms. Fischer taught him the geography of Earth and the New World, Mr. Nowotny told him about the sky and the stars and the relationship of suns and planets. Dr. Dvali taught him physics: inclined planes, the inverse square, electromagnetism. Isaac remembered his astonishment the first time he saw a magnet lift a spoon from a tabletop. An entire planet pulling downward, and what was this bit of stone in its power to reverse that universal flow? He had only begun to make sense of Dr. Dvali's answers.

Last year Dr. Dvali had shown him a compass. The planet, too, was a magnet, Dr. Dvali said. It had a rotating iron core, hence lines of force, a shield against charged

particles arriving from the sun, a polarity that distinguished north from south. Isaac had asked to borrow the compass, a hefty military model made on Earth, and Dr. Dvali had generously allowed him to keep it.

Late in the evening, alone in his room, Isaac placed the compass on his desk so that the red point of the needle aligned with the letter *N*. Then he closed his eyes and spun himself around, stopped and waited for his dizziness to subside. Eyes still closed, he felt what the world told him, intuited his place in it, found the direction that eased some inner tension. Then he put out his right hand and opened his eyes to see which way he was pointing. He found out a lot of things, mostly irrelevant.

He performed the experiment on three successive nights. Each night he discovered himself aligned almost perfectly with the *W* on the face of the compass.

Then he did it again. And again. And again.

It was shortly before the annual meteor shower that he resolved at last to share this unsettling discovery with Sulean Moi.

The meteor shower came at the end of every August—this year, on the 34th. (Months in the New World were named after terrestrial months, though each one lasted a few days longer than its namesake.) On the eastern coast of Equatoria, August signaled the beginning of the end of the mild summer: boats left the rich northern fisheries with their last harvests in order to arrive back at Port Magellan before the autumn storms began. Here in the desert it signified little more than the steady, subtle cooling of the nights. Desert seasons were nocturnal, it seemed to Isaac: the days were mostly alike, but winter nights could be biting, painfully cold.

Slowly Isaac had allowed Sulean Moi to become his friend. It wasn't that they talked much or about anything especially important. Sulean seemed almost as wordless as Isaac often was. But she accompanied him on his walks through the hills, and she was more agile than seemed possible for her age: she was slow, but she could climb as well as Isaac, and she could sit motionless for an hour or more when Isaac did. She never gave him the impression that this was a duty or a strategy or anything more or less than her way of sharing certain pleasures he had always suspected were his alone.

Sulean must not have seen the annual meteor shower before, since she told Isaac she had arrived in Equatoria only months ago. Isaac was a fan of the event and declared that she ought to see it from a good vantage point. So—with the uneasy permission of Dr. Dvali, who didn't seem to entirely approve of Sulean Moi—on the evening of the 34th he escorted her to the flat rock in the hills, the rock from which he had first seen her appear on the sun-quivering horizon.

That had been daylight, but now it was dark. The New World's moon was smaller and faster than Earth's, and it had traversed the sky completely by the time Sulean and Isaac arrived at their destination. Both carried hand lanterns to light their way, and both wore high boots and thick leggings to protect them from the sandfish that often basked on these granite ledges while the stone was still breathing out the heat of the day. Isaac scanned the location carefully and found no wildlife present. He sat crosslegged on the stone. Sulean bent slowly but without complaint into the same posture. Her face was serene, calmly expectant. They turned off their lanterns and

allowed the darkness to swallow them up. The desert was blacker than the sky, the sky was salted with stars. No one had officially named these stars, though astronomers had given them catalog numbers. The stars were as dense in the heavens as swarming insects. Each star was a sun, Isaac knew, and many of them cast their light on inaccessible, unknowable landscapes—perhaps on deserts like this one. Things lived among the stars, he knew. Things that lived vast slow cold lives, in which the passage of a century was no more than the blink of a distant eye.

“I know why you came here,” Isaac said.

He couldn’t see the old woman’s face in this darkness, which made the conversation easier, eased the embarrassing clumsiness of words like bricks in his mouth.

“Do you?”

“To study me.”

“No. Not to study you, Isaac. I’m more a student of the sky than I am of you in particular.”

Like the others at the compound, she was interested in the Hypotheticals—the unseen beings who had rearranged the heavens and the earth.

“You came because of what I am.”

She cocked her head and said, “Well, yes, that.”

He began to tell her about his sense of direction. He spoke haltingly at first, and more confidently when she listened without questioning him. He tried to anticipate the questions she might want to ask. When had he first noticed this special talent? He couldn’t remember; only that it had been this year, a few months ago, just a glimmering at first: for instance, he had liked to work in the compound’s library because his desk there faced the same direction as the desk in his room, though there was no window to look through. In the dining room he always sat at the side of the table nearest the door, even when there was no one else present. He had moved his bed so that he could sleep more comfortably, aligned with—with, well, *what?*

But he couldn’t say. Everywhere he went, always, when he stood still, there was a direction he preferred to face. This was not a compulsion, only a gentle urge, easily ignored. There was a good way to face, and a less good way to face.

“And are you facing the good way now?” Sulean asked.

In fact he was. He hadn’t been aware of it before she asked, but he was comfortable on this rock looking away from the mountains into the lightless hinterland.

“West,” Sulean said. “You like to face west.”

“A little north of west.”

There. The secret was out. There was nothing more to say, and he heard Sulean Moi adjust her posture in the silence, adapting to the pressure of the rock. He wondered if it was painful or uncomfortable to be so old and to sit on solid stone. If so, she gave no indication of it. She looked up at the sky.

“You were right about the falling stars,” she said after a long time. “They’re quite lovely.”

The meteor shower had begun.

Isaac was fascinated by it. Dr. Dvali had told him about meteors, which were not really stars at all but burning fragments of rock or dust, the remains of ancient comets circling for millennia around the New World’s sun. But that explanation had only added to Isaac’s fascination. He sensed in these evanescent lights the enacting of

ancient geometries, vectors set in motion long before the planet was formed (or before it had been constructed by the Hypotheticals), rhythms elaborated over a lifetime or several lifetimes or even the lifetime of a species. Sparks flew across the zenith, east to west, while Isaac listened inwardly to the murmurings of the night.

He was content that way, until Sulean suddenly stood and peered back toward the mountains and said, “Look—what’s that? It looks like something falling.”

Like luminous rainfall, as if a storm had come down through the high passes of the divide—as they sometimes did, but this glow wasn’t lightning; it was diffuse, persistent. She said, “Is that normal?”

“No,” Isaac said.

No. It wasn’t normal at all.

“Then perhaps we ought to go back.”

Isaac nodded uneasily. He wasn’t afraid of the approaching—well, “storm,” if that’s what it was—but it carried a significance he couldn’t explain to Sulean, a relationship to the silent presence that lived under the Rub al-Khali, the Empty Quarter of the far west, and to which his private compass was attuned. They walked back to the compound at a brisk pace, not quite running, because Isaac wasn’t sure that someone as fragile seeming as Sulean *could* run, while the mountain peaks to the east were first revealed and then obscured by fresh waves of this peculiar cloudy light. By the time they reached the gate the meteor shower was entirely hidden by this new phenomenon; a sort of dust had begun to fall from the sky, and Isaac’s lantern carved out an increasingly smaller swath of visibility. Isaac thought this falling substance might be snow—he had seen snow in videos—but Sulean said no, it wasn’t snow at all, it was more like ash. The smell of it was rank, sulfurous.

Like dead stars, Isaac thought, falling.

Mrs. Rebka was waiting at the compound’s main door and she pulled Isaac inside with a grip so intense it was painful. He gave her a shocked, reproving look: Mrs. Rebka had never hurt him before; none of the adults had hurt him. She ignored his expression and held him possessively, told him she had been afraid he would be lost in this, this . . .

Words failed her.

In the common room, Dr. Dvali was listening to an audio feed from Port Magellan, the great city on the eastern coast of Equatoria. The signal was relayed across the mountains by aerostats and was intermittent, Dr. Dvali told the gathered adults, but he had learned that the Port was experiencing the same phenomenon, a blanketing fall of something like ash, and that there was no immediate explanation. Some people in the city had begun to panic. Then the broadcast, or the aerostat relaying the signal, failed entirely.

Isaac, at Mrs. Rebka’s urging, went to his room while the adults talked. He didn’t sleep, couldn’t imagine sleeping. Instead he sat at the window, where there was nothing to see but a tunneled grayness where the overhead light bled into the ashfall, and he listened to the sound of nothing at all—a silence that nevertheless seemed to speak to him, a silence steeped in meaning.

CHAPTER TWO

Lise Adams drove toward the little rural airstrip on the afternoon of the 34th of August feeling lost, feeling free.

It was a feeling she couldn't explain even to herself. Maybe the weather, she thought. Late August along the coast of Equatoria was inevitably warm, often unbearable, but today the breeze from the sea was gentle and the sky was that indigo blue she had come to associate with the New World, deeper and truer than the smudgy pastel skies of Earth. But the weather had been fine for weeks, nice but not all that remarkable. Free, she thought, yes, absolutely: a marriage behind her, the *decree nisi* freshly-issued, an unwise thing undone . . . and, ahead of her, the man who had been a factor in that undoing. But so much more than that. A future severed from her past, a painful question hovering on the brink of an answer.

And lost, almost literally: she had only come out this way a couple of times before. South of Port Magellan, where she had rented an apartment, the coast flattened into an alluvial plain that had been given over to farms and light industry. Much of it was still wild, a sort of rolling prairie grown over with feathery grasses, meadows that broke like waves against the peaks of the coastal range. Before long she began to see small aircraft coming and going from Arundji's Airfield, which was her destination. These were little prop planes, bush planes: the runways at Arundji's weren't long enough for anything big. The planes that alighted there were either rich men's hobbies or poor men's businesses. If you wanted to rent a hangar, join a tourist excursion into the glacial passes, or get to Bone Creek or Kubelick's Grave in a hurry, you came to Arundji's. And if you were smart you talked to Turk Findley, who flew discount charters for a living, before you did any of those things.

Lise had flown with Turk once before. But she wasn't here to hire a pilot. Turk's name had come up in connection with the photograph Lise carried in a brown envelope, currently tucked into the glove compartment of her car.

She parked in the gravel lot at Arundji's, climbed out of the car, and stood listening to the sound of insects buzzing in the afternoon heat. Then she walked through the door at the back of the cavernous tin-roofed shed—it looked like a converted cow barn—that served as Arundji's passenger terminal. Turk's charter business operated out of a corner of this building with the consent of Mike Arundji, the airfield's owner, who took a share of Turk's profits in return. Turk had told her this, back when they had had time to talk.