

Directional Efficiency

You have a rule for yourself. The rule is you never go backwards. You do not retrace your steps, you avoid U-turns or driving around the block. The reverse gear is only employed when parking, and only when no “drive-ahead” space is available. Repetition is sometimes required, but is, in itself, not a problem; making multiple trips to the bathroom is fine as long as you’re facing ahead. Backwards steps are not permitted but these are easy to avoid in the course of everyday movement.

Each morning the directional charter begins anew, like an Etchasketch pad shook blank while you were sleeping. You get up and plan the day's route; arranging each appointment to assure your continuous advancement. Sometimes, people call in the middle of the day and demand your attention, for example your girlfriend, and you’re happy to work them in, if time and trajectory allow. The principles of directional efficiency, you explain to her while she’s cooking, are applied not only to piloting cars but to flying, travel by bus or train, to bikes and perambulation-- even walking around the house. Think of how much energy is wasted wandering here and there, arriving in one room only to realize you've forgotten something in the last.

You sip a glass of cheap Shiraz and watch your girlfriend search through three different drawers for a spatula. You explain you are in complete concordance with the physical universe here, from the slow decay of planetary orbits to the expansion premise itself. Your girlfriend makes a snorting sound through her nose while tossing the stir fry. Did you know, you say, at this very moment, that space, all objects in space, are flying away from each other, and the farther apart they are, the faster they fly away?

Interesting, your girlfriend says. Like they’re running away from something.

You think and then you say, What?

Running away, she says. That’s the picture I get from your fact.

She pushes food onto plates. Some sauce spills on the counter; a glutinous brownish glob.

You want to say you could just as easily call it a running towards, but then you start to think, running towards what? You remember your college astronomy professor comparing the expanding universe to a loaf of raisin bread, rising as it bakes. From the point of view of one raisin, he said, it's impossible to assign an objective center to the expansion. To further illustrate his point, the professor turned off the lights and showed an animation he cribbed from public TV, of stars, clusters of stars, of galaxies, zooming away from the camera in long, neon-like streaks. The animation was designed so the camera and you coincided-- when the camera moved, you moved, but no matter where you went, everything was still zooming. In the dark, watching the screen, it was easy to lose your bearings. You felt dizzy, lost in the motion. Your stomach began to feel queasy. You clutched the arm of your desk and thought about closing your eyes but didn't; you just stared, with a growing sick feeling, as everything zoomed away from you, the unlocatable center.