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*Ignis Fatuus*  
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## Christopher Buckley

### *IGNIS FATUUS*

Swamp glow of the Milky Way, platters of dust, arms coiled around the galactic hub like fiery streamers in a black wind—unaccountable, too many stars ever to be of use.

Aren't stars beside the point—starlight, finally, so suburban? Is it still enough to be clever, allusive, like some minor movie star, collar of his black jacket turned up, smoking, overlooking the harbor lights in Denmark? Can you settle for approximations—glittering or not—with the little you have left to offer?

And it's nothing to say that the clouds sometimes climb like roses over the trellis of the blue. A wind insists against clusters of bottle brush and bougainvillea—like renegade clouds, white grocery bags scuttle along the sidewalks, up hill, suspended and darting in the alleyways. Each November galaxies of dry leaves and bracts spin away.

50 now, and never have you discussed rain so reverently ... there's no doubt—you're going to die. This is no longer some distant city off in the low analogical hills, a theorem you will never have to prove. The scientists have shown that everything returns to something—dust to . . . star dust, of course, so literal, remote, so cold.

Whatever it was I used to think I believed about reincarnation, I have forgotten. I only remember that, for a time, art sustained some vague apotheosis beyond our breath—Velazquez, for instance, standing there, looking out from Las Meninas, as if he knew. When he was made a Knight of the Court—that blood cross, that star, on his tunic, over his heart, signified that he could move among such shining society. And his painting, well, a brilliant means, not a source burning in and of itself.

My father believed he had been Velazquez, or perhaps the Spanish king who hired him. He must have missed those portraits in the background, hazy, fading in the mirror. And later, how could he have overlooked Christ foreshortened by Mantegna—the grey sticks of his feet

poking out the canvas at us? Or Caravaggio—prescient as light—his own head hung in the hand of David, offered to the dark—at 32, his own tired, moon-dead eyes?

So how is the spirit grounded, ground down to stellar gravel or settled dust? The wind moves through the oat grass, the star thistle, its purple heart, its silver points, its pain. Pythagoras proclaimed everything could be solved by numbers. By conforming to the arithmetic of the stars, we could escape the cycle of rebirth—the universe just an algorithm of notes, monochord, string and riffs of light vibrating from spirit at one bright end and blood-dull earth at the other.

In Babylon they catalogued 1,022 stars on a thin celestial globe, a surface which equaled the boundary of heaven—rotation of moon and stars the only dim points to show where they were heading on earth. The world barely spinning then....

Beeswax sky, flame above the sinking edge of space . . . once I could have been found sitting creek-side, cataracts sending up a mist burning at the edge of dawn, content tossing pebbles in a pool, all the time in the world in the relay of ripples.... Yet, when I think about it, I never saw angels sauntering through the foothills with timpani or flutes, no one playing "Holiday for Strings"—only the blue rondo of water falling through water, no annotations in the paraffin sky.

The closest I ever came was at 15, surfing Miramar Point on a head-high swell. Salt water and blood rumbling with the breakers, crouched in a glassy tube, cutting back across the lip of the wave to stall and shoot through the curl again for the synergy of atoms and flying space—which is surely the singular reason I was there, though I could not have said it then as I calmly released myself to the cold seconds burning by, to that point where I felt the electron click of blue and yellow light at my fingertips flash out above the salt static and the froth, to burst clear, breathing where light was my only future, and not all that far removed.