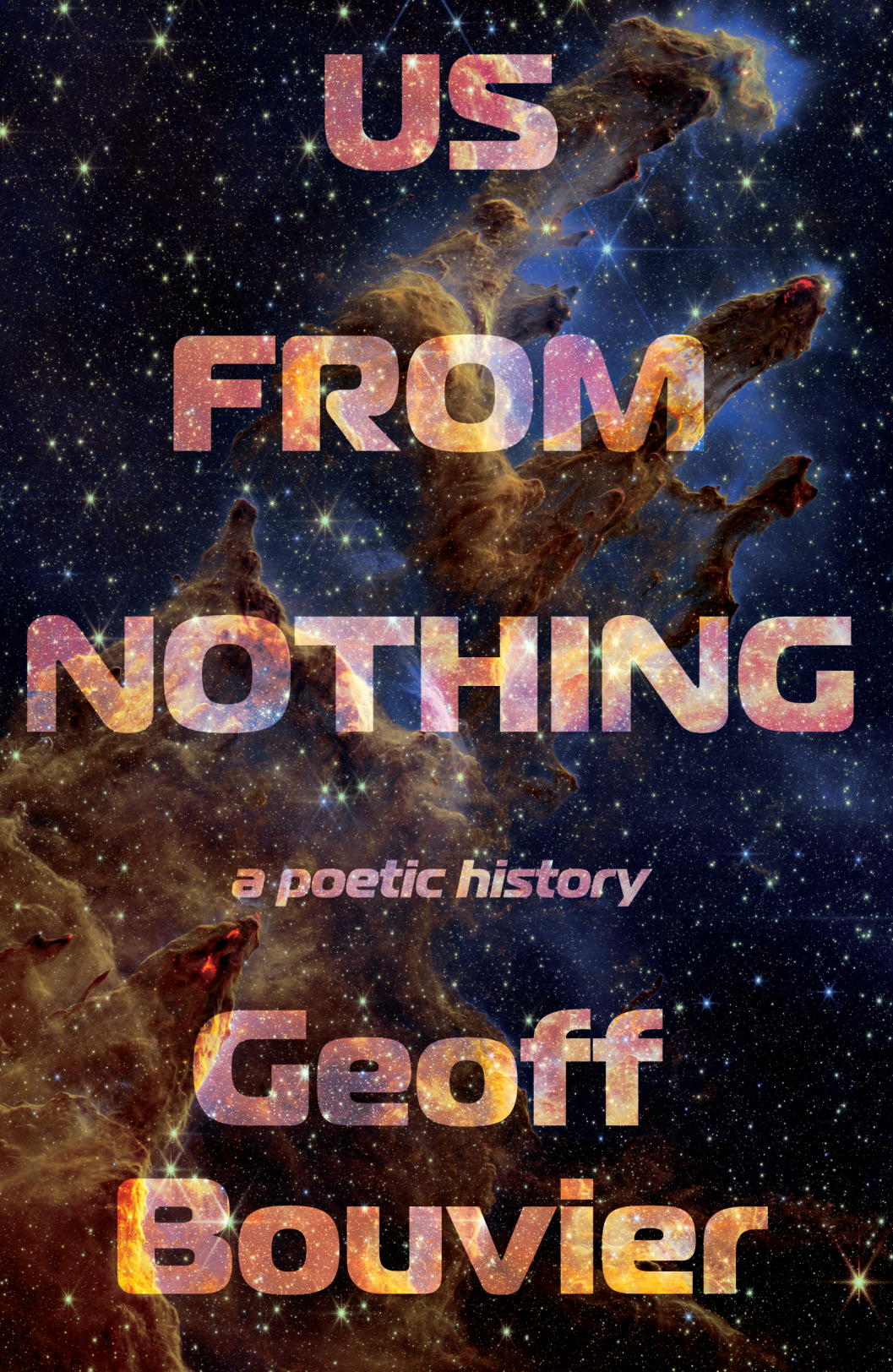
US
FROM
NOTHING
a poetic history
Geoff
Bouvier

US FROM NOTHING

Also by Geoff Bouvier

Glass Harmonica
Living Room

US FROM NOTHING

A POETIC HISTORY

GEOFF BOUVIER

A Buckrider Book

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for Sindu

CONTENTS

14.8 BILLION YEARS AGO

THE BIG BANG

Before the beginning, there was nothing – no size, no weight, no colour, no shape – but the nothing was changing.

A nothing must enjoy a possibility. Perhaps the void, in its autonomy, grew lonely or bored. Perhaps whatever had no nature pondered nature, asking questions of its not-yet-self.

Tell us, neutral blank abyss, how we got from you to us.

At the very first moment, a brighter something unwraps from nothing, and all the energy releases like a supreme being's muscular twitch. A cosmos before us becomes matter and space.

Some say we still hear the changing void in joy or pain moaning *Om*. Others claim the universe was born crying for light.

14.6 BILLION YEARS AGO

STARS

Scattered particles collect into hot molecular clouds everywhere for hundreds of thousands of years. And that's all that happens anywhere in the universe for hundreds of thousands of years.

Then the cloudy remnants gather enough heaviness, and a tremendous force unleashes. Atoms crack apart and fuse and crack apart and fuse, birthing energetic bodies of flaming nuclear bonds – self-sustaining spheres – the first stars.

New elements forge inside stars' massive cores. Helium. Lithium. More elements burst into being as old stars explode. Carbon. Oxygen. In time, the shattered bodies of the stars will make you and me and everyone and everything.

4.5 BILLION YEARS AGO

EARTH

Cosmic cloud after cosmic cloud collapses in nuclear fusion. Every stellar ignition blasts elemental fragments into orbits where the molten matter cools and recombines as hurtling globes encircling newborn stars.

In one such solar system, around the infant Sun, an average iron stone with a strong inner churn turns too fast. Its first day passes after six hours. The cracking surface seethes and seems to melt. Its careening mass collides with other astral debris, gouging out a crater whose colossal divot flies and forms a moon.

A world is never certain, but for now, the third planet from the Sun spins here.

3.8 BILLION YEARS AGO

LIFE

It's easy to argue that everything everywhere is alive – that we're all just variations of a self-reproducing, self-consuming, interrelated state of matter and antimatter – because every star, stone, person, and particle converts energy and settles into a bounded state driven to sustain its own bounded state, in cooperation with, and at the expense of, other bounded states.

It's also easy to argue that nothing anywhere is alive. That what was once considered life will be seen as just another property of everything – synthesizing, animating, reacting to its environment for a time, and eventually disorganizing.

As Empedocles will put it, in a few billion years – when the ethereal embryos of matter and energy grow efficient enough for consciousness, and consciousness arranges as culture, and culture matures into a Greek sage named Empedocles – "Life and death are mere questions of mixture and separation."

Vital acids may have rained to Earth from cosmic clouds, or proteins may have sprung from our own ocean vents. Either way, now the seafloors swarm with glowing orb-like protozoans.

443 MILLION YEARS AGO

LIFE ON LAND

Life exists because of sunlight, and life exists because of shade. For all of life's time on our planet, no cell has survived unless it swam below the canopy of water.

Oceans throng with microbes, sponges, corals, crabs, rays, mollusks, fish. For 3.4 billion years, their bodies have complicated and decomposed, and their slow decay has outgassed layers that dim the deadliness of the Sun.

Today, life has learned to hold a drop of ocean in its egg. New cells born on dry land can thrive above the water, breathing in the shaded air.

Life will only have to walk for an eighth as long as it swam before it thinks, looks back, and sees its dazed reflection in the sea.

66 MILLION YEARS AGO

END OF THE DINOSAURS

A second star of morning glows eerie and faint, ominous sign on the dawn skyline. No tyrannosaurus is able to perceive it, twinkling like Venus, low in the rosy distance. And for hours, the sky's new morning "star" expands. Until it slams Earth's atmosphere – a flaming, five-mile-wide meteor plunging through haze, disintegrating oxygen, approaching touchdown.

When the big rock hits, vaporizing seawater, all life within six hundred miles is snuffed out by a thunderous force like billions of volcanoes thrusting rocks around as if they were glowing fluid. From the sudden crater, hill-sized tsunamis rise, as fast as hurricanes, threshing over seafloors, pushing beaches miles inland. A spreading fog brings rain of blazing tar that sets fire to forests. In days, an ashfall blanket drifts across the shorelines, choking ocean shallows into blackened mud. The planet spins encased in cloud.

Artificial winter lasts a million years. The final dinosaur exhales and lies still on dead land.

Geoff Bouvier's first book, *Living Room*, was selected by Heather McHugh as the winner of the 2005 APR/Honickman First Book Prize. His second book, *Glass Harmonica*, was published in 2011 by Quale Press. He received an MFA from Bard College's Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts in 1997 and a PhD in Creative Writing from Florida State University in 2016. In 2009, he was the Roberta C. Holloway visiting poet at the University of California - Berkeley. He lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his partner, the novelist SJ Sindu, and teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University and Vermont College of Fine Arts.

"Bouvier gives us a time-lapse view of time itself – all of it – from the big bang through the emergence of humans (music composes us) on to the present day, in which we are the aliens, and from there into an amortal future. His intricate and stunningly beautiful sentences are full of surprising scientific specificity. It's sleight of hand at its most poetic."

– Cole Swensen, author of *Art in Time*

"This is a marvellous book. Only an immensely fertile imagination could tell so elemental a tale in so straightforward yet evocative a fashion. Simple sentences often carry astounding weight. Bouvier makes one care about characters like 'Life' and 'We' and then the emergence of virtually all of the world's major thinkers in cameo."

– Charles Altieri, UC Berkeley

"Geoff Bouvier has written a tour through physics and biology and language and art and mathematics and sociology, to the point where such categorizations fall away into meaninglessness, and everything becomes, again, one. This book, like all great books, reframes reality, imagines unbelievable true stories, and by doing so creates for us a richer way of apprehending the world."

– Patrick Madden, author of *Disparates*

"An encyclopedic epic after Eduardo Galeano, *Us from Nothing* takes on history in poetically compressed, paragraphic cantos. In conversation with cosmic origins as it connects with patterns, past events, and pressing concerns, the whole corrects records and delights in telling a tale of the tribe. A contextualizing arrangement, part Blake, part Williams, wholly relational and delighting."

– Hoa Nguyen, author of *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*

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