

IN THE BEGINNING

from Bart Moeyart

IN THE BEGINNING there was nothing.

It's hard to imagine what nothing looks like.

You have to get rid of everything that exists, everything that is now.

You have to turn off the light, stop existing yourself, and then disregard the dark for good measure, because in the beginning there was nothing, not even the dark.

If you want to picture the beginning, then you'll have to empty your head of a great deal.

Including your mother.

ALL YOU HAVE left is God and me.

It's not easy to be left with God and me when you've been thinking about nothing, but never mind: God and me don't amount to much anyway. We're even less than you think.

We're just a puff of air that drifts around the world at night.

We're a shower with no rain. We're not even as much as the snow that fell last year. That's how small we are.

But we were there even so, in the beginning. There was nothing, and God, and me – and a stool to sit on, because there had been nothing for a long, long time. It was dreadful.

WE HAD NEVER heard of later. Morning hadn't even crossed our minds. There was no earlier and no fine weather today, no cup of tea and would you like a biscuit with it, no photo of the dog with the budgie on his head, and there was nothing

to talk about, because we'd said all there was to say about the view.

Whichever way you looked at it – front, back, top, bottom – nothing changed, nothing remained nothing. But when I asked God how he was doing and if his stool was comfortable, he gave me the thumbs up and nodded into the bargain. Everything was fine, he said. Everything was fine. Even though there was still nothing.

'IF YOU PUT your mind to it you can imagine what it's going to be like,' he said out of the blue, and he motioned all around with both hands in tandem, poking at nothing here and there as if he were touching things that didn't yet exist before they were even there. 'Are you looking?' he said. 'Do you see?' He said what he saw, named things by name; but if, out of everything, all you knew by name was nothing and a stool, then you had no idea what he was on about. A table has four paws, and it has a budgie on its head and you can sit down to eat at a dog.

'You see everything,' said I to God. 'That's all very well for you, but I'm curious.'

That was precisely the right answer. The advantage of nothing and a stool is that they're only two things. If that's all there is, you have little to worry about.

'I am particularly curious about what you plan to begin with,' said I to God, and I copied him, poking my fingers into nothing. Not the most courteous thing to do I admit, but that smile on his lips wasn't the sweetest smile either, seeing how much he was looking forward to the things that didn't yet exist – and all by all that was a quite a lot.

'Let's see,' said God. He spread his arms wide and created something.

It was something I didn't see at first. It was day. I only figured it out a couple of hours later, when it got dark. 'So,' said God in the twilight, and although it was difficult to see, I was sure his thumb was standing to attention.

MY MOUTH SLAMMED shut. If God and me don't amount to much, even less than you think, then of the two of us he is the most. Only, just then it wasn't so easy to admit. What if it was going to get dark anyway, of its own accord, if day and night were just a part of nothing, if something was about to happen to my stool? For all I knew, I wasn't who I was, and my stool was later going to turn into something else. 'Fine,' said I as I peered into the night and thrummed with my fingers on my knee. 'And what's next?' 'Another day,' said God, and he smiled, and put his hands behind his head, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

I ALMOST TOLD him not to be so bumptious, but I didn't get the chance. It doesn't take much to turn nothing into something. In God's case, a sigh of satisfaction was quite enough.

Compared with the beginning, everything seemed to be the same, just as it was when day and night were made, but that was pretence. The hairs on my arms stood on end. My eyelashes fluttered, bringing tears to my eyes. If you start with nothing, every movement seems exaggerated. I was once in a room where nothing was moving when a mouse darted across the floor. Worse than that, I was once in a room where nothing was moving when a mouse darted across the floor and a cat woke up. That's how it was, after his sigh, and it didn't get much better. The wind kept blowing, harder and harder. If this kept up there was going

to be a storm and before long there would be thunder and lightning. Unavoidable.

'Yipes,' said I.

'Yes,' said God. And oops-a-daisy, up went his thumb.

I looked around and I saw it: right here it was wet, over there it was dry. 'Coincidence,' I said. 'Pure coincidence.'

'So,' SAID GOD, and he licked his thumb and jabbed it against his chest. 'That's a really big coincidence, then. I was just sitting here thinking of land and water and there it was, land and water. It's the strangest thing.' He dangled his feet in the sea and leaned backwards with his hands in the sand. On the inside I was completely overwhelmed; good thing I was sitting down. But I wasn't about to throw in the towel. Absolutely nothing had started yet, I told myself. Nothing consisted of day and night, wet and dry, belief, unbelief, and a stool.

'Cause and effect,' I said, as I folded my arms and tried not to notice how really beautiful the land and the sea had become. 'It's about time something happened. This side or that side, we can all invent things,' and I flapped my hands to indicate which side I meant.

IF GOD AND me don't amount to much, then of the two of us – to be completely honest – I am the least. A speck of dust. Breathe out and I'm gone. That's how little I am.

The beginning of the beginning was three days old when all at once God rolled out a messy carpet of green and grass and ground out of which all sorts of things grew and budded and blossomed and waved back and forth in the wind from the sea and from the land.

'Good,' said God.

'Good', said I, and I could have thumped myself, because God was kind and everything and I was rotten and almost nothing. I said, without budging from my stool, that everything was moving along beautifully. 'Look at it grow and bud and blossom, in the wind, in the wind, in the wind,' and what I meant to say was that everything was just loose sand. I didn't know where I was, I said. On my stool between day and night, land and water, and everything that grew and budded and blossomed, it was all very nice, but where was it?

'Where?' said I to God.

AND DO YOU know what he did? He drew a circle around me with his hands and all at once I knew exactly where I was. On my stool between the sun and the moon and the stars and beyond as far as far can be. And then when he named the entire heavens, I sprung to my feet, and shouted: 'Good,' just before he had the chance to stick up his thumb and sing his own praises.

'GOOD,' SAID I, and I jabbed in God's direction with my finger as if I could already touch what I was going to tell him.

'What precisely do want from me? Why am I here? For the applause? To present you with a bunch of flowers later for your trouble? Or would you like me to dig myself a ditch to stand in and make myself even smaller than I already am, never small enough compared with the things you do? Or do you have some big idea of your own to make me feel that I'm shrinking and that I'm on my way to becoming less than nothing. You create a magnificent far as far can be, but in the meantime the closest of all – and that's me – is on the

point of disappearing. I've never felt so alone, under your stars, on your earth, in the wind, in the wind, in the wind,' and what I meant was that the bushes and the rest of the shrubbery only seemed to come to life when it blew. What was there for me in all this creation? Light and shadow, scents and flames, and a banana to eat, but as far as I could see another plant with arms and legs like me was nowhere to be found.

God just grinned.

'You can laugh,' said I. 'I can't.'

'I'm laughing because of them, and not because of you,' said God, and he pointed to the dog at my feet, at the budgie on my head, at the cat that had just been created and had already caught a mouse.

EVERYTHING WAS TRYING to climb onto my lap. A baby chimp, a billy-goat, and if it didn't want to be on my lap then it followed me around or stayed where it was. Then it crawled or flew or swam, then it ran or clambered and in a couple of cases even more than that, or different things all at once.

I think it took me a whole day before I had seen everything, and even then I still hadn't seen everything because some things hid themselves and some I didn't even notice, because they were under my skin or in my hair or simply not visible to the naked eye, not even if they had waved at me with both paws at once.

'Good,' said I over my shoulder, and I meant it. I even gave it the thumbs up and waited for God's voice behind my back. Not a word.

'Fine by me,' said I over my shoulder.

I REALLY FELT sorry for God. He was tired. If I say God and me don't amount to much, that's just a guess. My own estimation. I'll never be sure. Now that I've seen what nothing looks like, something sometimes seems an awful lot, and almost nothing is sometimes laughably little. And if I carry on along the same lines then, who knows, God is almost everything. Try to invent something that doesn't yet exist. Do it again and again. I can imagine that creating things leaves its mark on a person. I once made a figure out of bread, it was supposed to be a sheep. What a scrumptious horse, said my mother, as she slapped on the butter. It's so easy to make mistakes.

'God,' said I, and I swivelled around on my stool. 'Why did you make light first and only later the sun? Shouldn't it have been the other way round? Shouldn't it have been at one and the same time? Looking back, don't you think it was a bit pointless, and don't you regret having done it?

I could have kicked myself. What started as a well-intentioned question had suddenly taken a strange turn. There was a bitter taste in my mouth. The dog at my feet sat skew-whiff, and some of the other animals became restless, but God just looked around unflustered. He nodded at me, and he nodded at the rest of the world, and he said that everything was good. 'God,' said I, and I turned away from him. 'You're so strict with everything except for me. Why don't you admit it: I'm a mistake.'

'Not at all,' said God. And he flapped with his hands. He showed me this side and that side. They were different, and if you looked really close, they complemented one another.

Then he pointed to me and to a woman. She was standing there all of a sudden. She was beautiful and naked just like me, and she seemed to glow.

'Perhaps you're right,' said God.

The dog at my feet jumped up and wagged its tail. Just the same as a thumbs up, if you ask me.

NEXT DAY, WHEN the woman and I woke up in our warm woolly bed, we tried not to make too much noise.

God was asleep. God was having a lie in. He'd had a busy week. He was lying on his belly with his arms outstretched, and he was snoring gently. As evening fell he turned on his side and mumbled in his sleep.

'So,' he said, and that it was the end of the week. He had created nothing today, nothing, because he had never created nothing before.

'That's true,' I said to the woman. 'That's true. In the beginning nothing was already there, but it wasn't God's nothing. It's difficult to imagine what that's like, because you can't allow everything there is now to be just yet. You have to put out the light and then put the darkness out of your mind for good measure, because in the beginning there was nothing, not even the dark. If you want to picture the beginning of everything, you have to leave out an awful lot.'