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edited by Orson Scott Card

GETTING LOST

Survival, Baggage
and Starting Over
in J. J. Abrams' *Lost*

**Cosmic
Vertigo
on the
Isle of *Lost***

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My wife hates islands. They're so small. When it took us only an hour or so to drive around Oahu, she started getting antsy to go home to the continent, where you can drive and drive and drive and still be in Texas.

But islands still intrigue us. When I stand on a shoreline and see a tiny outcropping of rock, I find myself trying to figure out a way to get onto it without drowning or getting pounded to death by surf against stone. Tom Sawyer and his gang couldn't resist that muddy island in the Missizip. Cartoonists have been sticking people on that same tiny island with a single palm tree for more years than I've been alive. Islands are tiny universes; we can look around and see everything. Islands are the end of the world.

The terror was so crazy, so real, and I knew I had to deal with it.

—Jack

Lost Amidst the Seas or Stars?

The show is about lost people on a lost island.

—J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof (co-creators of *Lost*)

SO, HERE WE ARE, humanity having survived six years beyond the three zeros of the new millennium, six years beyond 2000. Are we lost?

Is being lost the condition symbolized by Jack's compass-like tattoo at the top of his left arm, a tattoo which is on vivid display in the first minutes of the pilot episode of *Lost*? The tattoo is not a complete compass, only a partial compass, perhaps suggesting a compass broken or rendered inoperable. Such meaning seems likely, especially considering the tattoo of spirals and flaming stars, which lie almost completely hidden, tucked on the inside of Jack's left bicep and elbow? Shirtless, Jack may be a sexy guy, but is he bearing the mark of a human compass no longer able to navigate the seas and stars?

Lost. It's a great story, one for the ages.

Swept by fate to an island amidst a vast ocean, a solitary island filled with mysterious wonders, generating awe and fear, the ugly and the beautiful, the ridiculous and the sublime. As the survivors tell us the stories of the island, we realize they are actually talking about our world, the modern world situated across the seas, far removed from the island paradise. In these stories, we see the mythos of modernity, the destiny of its future that is past. It's a great story, one for the ages—it is called *New Atlantis* and it was written in 1629 by Francis Bacon.¹ *New Atlantis* is perhaps one of the most influential and prophetic fictional futures ever penned, because the story theorized a technological future that has been realized over the subsequent centuries.

So, what could a short story written four centuries ago have to do with decoding *Lost*, a hit television show in 2006? At first glance, *Lost* reveals a televised synthesis of *Lost World* and *Lord of the Flies*, offering a metaphorical tale of human survival and human civilization. While accurate, there is another theme, perhaps deeper and more disturbing. *Lost* indeed depicts a "lost world," yet the show illustrates the paradox of a "new world" fast becoming a "lost world," the very conditions humanity faces entering the new millennium. The modern world was once the new world, yet it is now entropic, leaving the emerging postmodern to confront the reemerging pre-modern. Yes,

¹ Francis Bacon, "New Atlantis," in *Ideal Commonwealths* (New York: Dedalus/Hippocrene, [1629] 1988): 103–37.

Lost is fun and strange, but it is also loaded with heavy meanings, very heavy, so heavy they cause things to crash.

The heaviest meanings in *Lost* can be found by situating the island-based show on a trajectory shared with two other island myths, each of which points toward the cultural and technological conditions of humanity, past and future. Plato's Atlantis foresaw the human condition in the tale of the ideal society for pre-modern conditions, Bacon's *New Atlantis* prophesied the modern technological ambition, and *Lost* projected the postmodern technological vertigo. From Atlantis to *New Atlantis* to *Lost*, we see the trajectory and vertigo of human possibility, manifest in plane crashes and mysterious islands, symbolizing humanity's relations with technology and nature. Yes, the trajectory of human culture is televised as if a disaster movie!

Visions of Vertigo

My head is a little dizzy right now.

—The Pilot

In the pilot episode of *Lost*, the first scene shows an extreme close-up of a human eye, dilated and then coming into focus. The eye belongs to Jack, the doctor, the man of science, lying on his back in the jungle, looking upward, toward the skies, which lie mostly hidden beyond the forest of bamboo towering above him. After Jack struggles to his feet and dashes through the bamboo toward the beach, his eyes soon survey a most extreme condition. A jetliner has crashed on the beach of an island, flames still burning, debris everywhere, people dead or dying, and the survivors staggering around in utter shock. The first few minutes of the pilot episode set the technological trajectory for the first season—crashed airliners, the cockpit landing in a tree, a passenger sucked into a jet engine, the fuselage of the plane used as a funeral pyre, cell phones with no connections, mysterious radio transmissions, wires buried beneath the beach, useless laptops pillaged for batteries, sailing ships filled with skeletons stranded high up on the island, and glowing hatches leading to the depths.

Of course, Jack's eyes are our eyes, and through Jack's eyes we are seeing some kind of vision, a cinematic technique employed in any number of science fiction films, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* to *Blade*

Runner to *The Terminator*. Through Jack's eyes in those first few moments we surveyed a certain human condition, a cultural condition illustrated across the first season, the postmodern condition of technological and cosmic vertigo.

Since the arrival of the Bomb, urban decay, energy crises, blackouts, widespread pollution, and all the other unintended and unexpected consequences of industrialization, the once-soaring confidence in modern technology has not only been shaken, but also symbolically brought down to Earth. This vertiginous condition is illustrated by the proliferation of apocalyptic films and "disaster movies" involving technology—*Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail-Safe*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Soylent Green*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Airport*, *Westworld*, *The Towering Inferno*, the *Mad Max* trilogy, *The Matrix* trilogy, and many others. Regarding disaster movies, *Lost* co-creator J. J. Abrams exclaimed: "I love those movies!" Co-creator Damon Lindelof added: "Me, too. *The Towering Inferno* is like the greatest movie, ever." The cinematic milieu of disaster movies informed the creation of *Lost*, as explained by Abrams:

I grew up on movies like Earthquake, The Poseidon Adventure, the Airport movies. . . . The approach was not to consciously avoid any clichés or stylistically borrow from some other genre, but to take a storyline that might easily fit into the classic 1970s disaster movies and then tell it in a way that felt committed and real and scary and unique.²

In apocalyptic and disaster movies, something is always falling, literally and figuratively—bombs dropping, skyscrapers collapsing, jets crashing, ships sinking, civilization collapsing, and of, course, people falling from buildings, falling from planes, drowning in the ocean, and so on. *Lost* continues this vertiginous trajectory, with a jetliner crashing on a mysterious island, bringing survivors down to Earth to confront life without the infrastructure of modernity, without a compass for the stars.

² Mark Cotta Vaz, *The Lost Chronicles* (New York: Hyperion, 2005): 79.

Launched on the Isle of *New Atlantis*
Everyone gets a new life on this island.

—Locke

Locke's observation about everyone getting a "new life" was implied by the title of the first episode (following the two-part pilot), called "Tabula Rasa (1-3)." By crashing on the island, everyone was given a blank slate, and a new start, a new future, a new tomorrow. Of course, the condition of "tabula rasa" has a double meaning. Not only is everyone given a personal clean slate, but the life they would live would be new, at least in contrast to their lifestyles in the modern world they previously navigated, with all the technological and cultural compasses. Though mostly forgotten now, one of the central promises of modernity was a "new life" in a "new world," where science and technology would guide humanity out of the poverty and ignorance that had dominated most of human existence.

In *Lost*, a jetliner encounters turbulence over the ocean and eventually crashes, partially on the island and partially in the sea. The survivors are those from the fuselage section that tumbled down on the island. In Bacon's *New Atlantis*, the vessel is a sailing ship, which encounters the turbulence of a massive hurricane. In the televised terms of the Weather Channel, this hurricane was likely a "Cat 5" (Category Five, the most powerful hurricane). As with the passengers in *Lost*, the surviving sailors are hurled beyond the space-time coordinates of the known world. A few sailors managed to survive in a life raft but are without a compass, adrift for many days in the vast ocean. Eventually, the sailors encounter a very mysterious island. Most strange is that this island, previously unknown to the world, is home to a functioning utopia, the first model of the modern technological society.

The apocalyptic hurricane transported the sailors beyond the old world, cleansing their vision, enabling them to arrive in the new world, a blank slate written anew. The world that Bacon theorized was a post-medieval world, a modern world ordered via science and technology. In *New Atlantis*, the scientist and technologist would assume equal status with the politician and theologian, with the planners of the utopia using scientific procedure and empirical knowledge to establish the technological sovereignty of humans over nature. This

philosophy was expressed in the guiding principle of the island civilization: "The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, the effecting of all things possible."³

Four centuries later, it is easy to dismiss this principle as utopian hyperbole, especially after seeing the industrial consequences of "the effecting of all things possible." However, it is impossible not to see that many of the technological themes in *New Atlantis* have been realized in building the modern world, where we now inhabit a technological mode of existence. To display these themes, the island was structured much like a World's Fair or theme park, with palace-like "houses" for modeling nature, conducting experiments, and demonstrating technological possibilities.

Though Bacon was speaking in general terms, the following examples offer a striking anticipation of specific technologies of the modern world: 1) machines for generating varieties of heat, including heat from the sun and heat from motion; 2) houses of metallurgy, for creating all kinds of precious minerals and re-creating precious gems; 3) "engine-houses" for machines generating all kinds of motion, natural and mechanical, including rapid acceleration and perpetual motion; 4) artificial wells and fountains filled with water; 5) towers one-half mile high, used for all kinds of meteorological observations; 6) "perspective-houses" for conducting all kinds of experiments with light, including "multiplications of light" which they transmit to great distances, and which they receive from afar; 7) the "interknowledge" of other nations via "magicians" of land and air; 8) "sound-houses" for re-creating all kinds of harmonies—natural, artificial, and musical; the human voice is also amplified over great distances; 9) gardens and orchards for manipulating every kind of agricultural production—increasing the variety of foods and making them "greater than their nature"; 10) parks for breeding and re-designing all kinds of animals—altering size, shape, and color; 11) houses for simulating various weather phenomena—rain, storms, lightning, and so on; 12) the greatest inventions are housed in galleries, along with statues of the greatest inventors.⁴

³ Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 129.

⁴ Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 113–114, 129–37.

Bacon's vision is remarkable, considering he was writing in 1626, before Newton and before the steam engine, electricity, and electronic media. Examples 1–5 point toward the foundations of the modern metropolis: electricity, industrialization, mechanization, motorized transportation, indoor plumbing, human control of water resources, and skyscraper-like towers. Examples 6–8 point toward the foundations of the information age: electric light and mass media, including photography, sound recording, radio, and television. Some might go so far as to suggest the multiplications of light and sound across great distances is what makes possible the Internet—the "interknowledge" among nations. Examples 9 and 10 point toward advanced agricultural technologies, breeding of animals, and perhaps even genetic manipulation. Though humans have not learned to control the weather (yet), it is certainly being simulated and modeled on the Weather Channel. The final example illustrates the reverence for the great inventors and inventions, not unlike how scientists, innovators, and industrialists are viewed in the modern world, from Newton to Einstein to Hawking, Henry Ford to Steve Jobs to Bill Gates.

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* remains one of the most visionary and influential utopian models ever imagined, for launched on the mythical island was the all-too-real trajectory of the modern world. Abandoning cave and castle for city, we now inhabit electrified metropolises with towering skyscrapers and sprawling suburbs. There are malls and stores brimming with goods and foods, cars and planes crossing continents, satellites and space shuttles orbiting the world, cyberspace and the Internet circling the world. Launched from *New Atlantis*, the modern world has indeed rocketed across the skies and into the stars, from planes to satellites to rockets. From *tabula rasa* to total technology, the blank slate is no more.

So why, at the pinnacle of building this world, has there been such a proliferation of apocalyptic films and disaster movies, all suggesting the crash of the modern world? And why is there *Lost*, a hit show inspired by such films, in which there are lost people having crashed on a lost island? To fully answer this question, we must return to the birth of all lost-world mythologies, the island of Plato's Atlantis. Yeah, more heavy meanings are coming, but it takes heavy stuff to crash things down to Earth, be it gravity or vertigo.

Vertigo on the Isle of Atlantis

You guys... is this normal? Kind of day turning into night... you know... end-of-the-world kind of weather.

—Charlie

Early in the pilot episode of *Lost*, Charlie joined Jack and Kate in a quest to find the cockpit of the crashed plane, which they think may have landed on the island. As they walk through the jungle-like growth on the island, the searchers are drenched by monsoon-like rains, prompting Charlie to wonder aloud if they were facing “end-of-the-world kind of weather.” Perhaps Charlie’s predicament is not merely a dependency on drugs and being a rock star. After all, his band’s name was “DriveSHAFT,” surely a technology central to modern mechanization and transportation. Has modernity driven so far it has crashed on the island? And DriveSHAFT’s most famous song was “You All Everybody,” the phrase Charlie sang to Kate and Jack when she mentioned that he seemed vaguely familiar. If Jack and Kate are “everybody,” then is their fate our condition?

Like the disaster movies cherished by the creators of *Lost*, Charlie’s end-of-the-world paranoia taps into a long trajectory of apocalyptic mythologies, where the human world is destroyed by hubris, arrogance, greed, ideology, or technology run amok. Here, one might immediately think of the biblical prophesies of Revelation, where the end of the world was greeted by all kinds of turbulent weather phenomena. If the Revelation version of The End occurs anytime soon, it will surely be hyped 24/7 on the Weather Channel. After all, the Weather Channel has created an apocalyptic new series called *It Could Happen Tomorrow*, and the first three episodes featured a hurricane drowning the Big Apple, a tornado destroying Big D (Dallas), and a volcano making a big mess with Seattle. Despite the cool special effects prophesied in Revelation, we must go back further in history to find the origin of the apocalyptic fears and fantasies about lost worlds.

If the trajectory of the modern world rises from Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, then the trajectory of the “lost world” reaches back to Plato’s Atlantis, where a new world became a lost world. Here is the origin for the vertigo that faces every culture at its height—in the power to create a new world we can also destroy the world.

Plato’s Atlantis was an island utopia, the first utopia in Western culture, the first utopia to disappear in an apocalypse and the first science fiction utopia to project a technological future where humans lived with nature by conquering nature. Born in the dialogues of *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the myth of Atlantis was described by Plato with such poetic detail that it seemed like a civilization that surely could have existed. The story was told by Critias in response to Socrates’s question about whether an ideal society had ever existed.⁵ The story of Atlantis went as follows.

Nine thousand years earlier, Atlantis existed as a great civilization situated on a magnificent island, somewhere in the oceans beyond the known world. Three sides of the island contained cliffs and mountains, while one side was open to the seas. Between the mountains was a rectangular plain, a fertile agricultural area irrigated with a grid of canals and channels, which carried river water flowing from the mountains. The island was also populated by many kinds of animals, along with exotic plants and fruits. There was an abundant supply of precious metals and food, so much that Atlanteans wanted for nothing in this paradise on Earth. Possessing great wealth, the power of Atlantis extended around the world.

The capital of Atlantis was situated on the open side of the island, between the plain and the seas. The city was structured as a series of concentric circles—alternate rings of land and water. Connected by bridges, the rings of land contained places to appreciate art and nature, gardens and fountains, places for exercise and contemplation. At the center of the city was the palace of the gods, surrounded by walls of gold and statuary. Ruling over Atlantis was a benevolent royalty, and the island utopia was protected by a powerful military. Despite the wealth and luxury, the Atlanteans were not intoxicated by the abundance and dedicated themselves to pursuing knowledge and living in harmony.

Eventually hubris and power-lust emerged on the island civilization, and the Atlanteans began enslaving other cultures around the world. However, the regime of Atlantis soon met its fate, for Athens dealt the Atlanteans a crushing military defeat, ending the civiliza-

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Classics, 1971): 109–21.

tion that went from utopia to dystopia. The cosmic forces turned against Atlantis, for it was soon destroyed in an apocalypse of earthquakes and hurricanes, causing the island to disappear forever beneath the ocean. For Atlantis, which had risen to such heights, it was the end of the world, exactly what Charlie feared in *Lost*.

Over the millennia, Plato's Atlantis exerted a lasting influence. Atlantis was the first utopia where nature and technology existed in harmony, with agriculture and irrigation amplifying the bounty of nature. Atlantis was the first model of the urban plan, where the city is ordered through geometric forms. Circles, spheres, and grids dominated virtually all subsequent utopian models, up through the twentieth century, from Le Corbusier and the modern metropolis to Walt Disney and the postmodern theme park. Perhaps most important, Atlantis originated two key utopian concepts that have spanned the millennia—the “new world” and the “lost world.” It is these two concepts that inform the technological trajectory illustrated in *Lost*.

Atlantis was the first model of a utopian “new world,” a human-created world that overcame the constraints of pure nature through the deployment of technology. In other words, Atlantis was the first example of the machine that transformed the garden. Since Atlantis deployed technology and planning, it was the genetic origin for the succession of rationalized utopian models, all oriented toward the future—the new world, the march of science, technological paradise, land of progress, metropolis, global village, information age, network society, and so on. Since Atlantis was destroyed in an apocalypse, it was also the first model of a “lost world,” a world or civilization that was destroyed or had disappeared. Atlantis is the genetic origin for an endless variety of nostalgic utopian models, all looking toward the past—the lost world, return to nature, garden paradise, promised land, small towns, local village, golden age, Gaia hypothesis, and so on.

Proponents of either utopian model (lost world or new world) believe that their vision will enable humanity to live more peacefully and harmoniously, with nature and/or with each other. Proponents of “lost world” utopias view the current cultural and/or natural worlds as degenerating toward doom and destruction, and thus assert that we need to preserve a world being lost, a world that existed in a more perfect yesterday.

Proponents of “new world” utopias also view the cultural world as entropic or chaotic, but assert that we can technologically improve this world, a world that will exist in a better tomorrow. Proponents of new world utopias often view the lost world utopias as simplistic and sentimental, antiquated, and outdated.

In the end, Atlantis poses the great paradox for humanity—we possess the power to improve the world or destroy it. We can ascend the heights to create a new world, or come crashing down to create a lost world. In the technological heavens, we have experienced the vertigo, the fear of the great fall. This vertigo is perfectly illustrated on another lost island, where the survivors have experienced the great fall in the crash of a jetliner.

Crashing on the Isle of *Lost*

Don't worry, it's gonna be over.

—Jack (to a passenger while on the plane during the turbulence that caused the crash)

So, here we are, six years into the millennium. Are we lost? As suggested by Jack's tattoos, are we now navigating with a broken compass, lost amidst the seas and stars?

Well, it is not enough to merely say that the trajectory of modernity has encircled the planet with all its technologies. Since World War II, the atom has been split, the gene mapped, sheep cloned, crops modified, organs transplanted, breasts implanted, penises inflated, ozone depleted, planet polluted, wars waged, bombs dropped, privacy ended, malls filled, wealth created, capital virtualized, space-time relativized, black holes verified, chaos theorized, reality televised, and the village globalized. *Apollo* landed on the moon, *Voyager* left the solar system, and Hubble gazes from outer space across the universe of the Big Bang.

Sending astronauts to the moon and media throughout the solar system, the space age and information age reflect the heights of modernity, the pinnacles of technological achievement in the stars of outer space and cyberspace. Surely, jetliners are another triumph of modern technology, propelling people around the planet, just like the information circulating throughout the global village. In the first ten

minutes of the pilot episode, the creators of *Lost* crafted a brilliant synthesis of the technological vertigo that underlies the disaster movies. They also captured a certain cosmic vertigo.

The first scene shows a close-up of Jack's eye, dilated and then coming into focus. As Jack focuses his eyes and directs his awareness, he is staring up toward the sky, largely hidden beyond the vanishing point created by the bamboo rising above him.

Anxious and uncertain, Jack experiences shortness of breath. Jack struggles to get up, and then begins running, passing a shoe dangling from a bamboo shoot. Someone has fallen back to Earth. After the mad dash through the bamboo forest, Jack finds himself surveying the shoreline. To his right is a pristine beach, untouched by humanity, with nothing but nature. As Jack scans to the left, we hear screams in the distance, becoming louder as Jack steps farther from the foliage to see debris of a jetliner, having crashed in part on the beach. The patterns of Jack's eyes are revealing, going from dilation to focus, from pristine nature to technological carnage.

Jack instinctively runs toward the crash site and then begins to scramble and stumble through the wreckage. Surviving passengers are staggering around, stunned or screaming. Some are shouting for family members, while others are trapped beneath parts of the plane. As Jack helps Claire, who is eight months pregnant, another man is sucked into a jet engine. The engine is lying on the beach but still connected to one wing and apparently receiving some power. Immediately upon sucking in the man, the engine explodes with an apocalyptic blast, knocking Jack and some others to the ground. Should we wonder: to what are we giving birth with our technology, a new world or our demise? In the context of *Lost*, it would be easy to conclude the technology we created is sucking us up, destined for an apocalypse, the technological vertigo of modernity.

Jack pauses his scramble, seeming to get his bearings, trying to get his mind around what has happened. As he is doing this, he glances upward, toward the sky. Towering above him is a wing of the plane, spewing fuel and still attached to the remaining fuselage, smoldering upside down on the beach. The jet engine is missing from the wing. In the background, we hear screams: "Help! Help!" We then see a shot of Jack, standing amidst the debris, staring up at the wing, extending

from the fuselage toward the skies, at a forty-five-degree angle. It is a very striking image. Soon after, the wing comes crashing down, triggering a massive explosion that knocks down Jack and Claire.

When Jack's eyes first open while lying beneath the bamboo, we see his tie, lying across his heart as he comes to consciousness. The tie has a repetitive pattern on a dark fabric. Crossing the tie at forty-five-degree angles is a series of propellers. When Jack, Kate, and Charlie discovered the portion of the plane with the cockpit, it was leaning against a large tree at a forty-five-degree angle. This portion of the plane soon crashed to the ground.

Jet engine or propeller power, technology has crashed, apparently returning to Earth at a forty-five-degree angle. Strangely the jetliner in *Lost* met the same geometric fate as the Space Needle in *Fight Club*. The Space Needle was designed to symbolize the space age, one of the themes celebrated at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. In the following passage from the novel *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden described his vision of utopia:

*"You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five degree angle. . . . You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life; and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. Jack and the beanstalk, you'll climb up through the dripping forest canopy and the air will be so clean you'll see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison to dry in the empty car pool lane of an abandoned superhighway stretching eight-lanes-wide and August-hot for a thousand miles. This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and utter destruction of civilization."*⁶

In Tyler Durden's ideal future, civilization is destroyed and the survivors become hunter-gatherers wandering amidst the cultural debris. A similar fate awaits the survivors on *Lost*, beginning a hunter-gatherer existence amidst the debris of a plane crash.

So, why are things crashing at forty-five-degree angles? Since a

⁶ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996): 116.

forty-five-degree angle is an "acute" angle, perhaps this means *Lost* and *Fight Club* are perceptive in suggesting civilization has reached a critical stage, a severe crisis. In the *Fight Club* future, the modern world becomes the lost world. In *Lost*, the modern world is now a lost world, lost to those survivors, stuck on a lost world that is their new world, their new life, their *tabula rasa*.

In the opening minutes of the pilot episode, we also see the end of the first day, with the sun setting beyond the ocean horizon. Humans have built fires, perhaps to stay warm or to signal to passing planes. Boone is dialing his cell phone but unable to receive a signal. As Boone is trying to make an electronic connection, he walks past Sayid tossing logs on a fire. In these few scenes it is clear—the global village is now a local village.

The forty-five-degree angle was also present in Jack's compass tattoo. The left part of the tattoo looks like the lines on a compass, which extend around like numbers on a clock. At the left-center of the tattoo is the number "5," leaning to the right at a forty-five-degree angle. The number 5 refers to how Jack confronts his fears, his own vertigo. As Kate sews up a laceration on Jack's left side, across from the tattoo of stars, Jack relates how he dealt with his fears during a surgery that seemed to be going awry:

"The terror was so crazy, so real, and I knew I had to deal with it. So I just made a choice. I'd let the fear in, let it take over, let it do its thing. But only for five seconds. That was all I was going to give it. So I started to count: 1...2...3...4...5. And then it was done. I went back to work and sewed her up and she was fine."

For Jack, the five seconds of fear functions like a compass, enabling him to navigate the existential conditions of his life and career.

Atop the leaning "5" are three lines that form the shape of an arrow, which comprise the upper right half of the tattoo. The arrow points at a forty-five-degree angle, up and away from the stars tattooed on the inside of Jack's arm. Perhaps the stars are suggestive of a more radical condition than being lost on an island. There are seven stars discernable in the tattoo. The largest stars are clustered close to a swirling red flame while the smaller stars are located farther away

from the center—is this tattoo a microcosm of the Big Bang and the fate of the universe?

In a cosmic sense, perhaps we have become lost, precisely as we discovered our location in the universe. We no longer reside on a world at the center of the cosmos. Earth is spinning around the sun, in a solar system located in a remote region of the Milky Way, a spiral galaxy spinning in an isolated region of the ever-expanding universe. Our blue planet orbits one of 200 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is one of 200 billion galaxies, all filled with billions of stars. Despite the number of galaxies, the Milky Way is destined to become ever more secluded as the void-like nothingnesses expand to push the galaxies away in all directions. In that sense, no computer knows precisely where we are, other than to say we are spiraling around the super-massive black hole at the center of the Milky Way, and the entire galaxy is hurtling through the universe. Since the Big Bang occurred fifteen billion years ago, this universe has been expanding in all directions. Moving apart at ever greater speeds, the galaxies are destined to move farther away from each other, until each one seems ever smaller as it disappears beyond the horizons of all the other galaxies. All of the universe is receding from view in all directions.⁷

And we should not forget that it was electronic media (radio telescopes and satellites) that confirmed the Big Bang after it was first theorized by Edwin Hubble, using images gathered via telescopes and captured on photographic plates. This seems a strange fate—to be lost amidst a cosmos we know ever better.

Perhaps this fate is why Jack's tattoo is a compass disconnected from the stars. The electronic transceiver recovered from the plane is almost broken and low on battery juice, thus making it risky to send out any signals that may not be received. According to the pilot, the jetliner had a broken radio and no ability to be tracked by radar. The pilot and crew had turned the plane in the direction of Fiji, so the plane was one thousand miles off course before crashing. So, no one knows where the survivors are, including the survivors and any possible search teams. Disconnected from the global networks of elec-

⁷ Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (New York: Vintage, 2004): 272–303.

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tronic media, the hopes for rescue seem slim. In terms of both space and time, the survivors are lost. They do not know where they are or when they are. The absence of modern technologies is propelling the survivors further back across the millennia, to living as hunter-gatherers and cave people in a lost world. In an expanding universe, their world has collapsed into an island cosmos, which they navigate with their hand-made compasses. In this sense, *Lost* is in *The Twilight Zone*.

In splitting the atom, we can power the world or destroy the world. In the Hubble telescope we can discover our place in the cosmos precisely as we realize we are lost in space. In our most powerful technologies, we face a Möbius condition—the flip side of atomic power is total destruction, the flip side of electronic telescopes is discovering that our place in the universe is no “place,” as in not any place other than in perpetual motion amidst the vast voids. Entering the millennium, we face an ironic paradox of technological accomplishment, for our technologies threaten to destroy the world while our telescopes reveal a disappearing universe.

If that is not heavy enough to provide a bit of cosmic vertigo, then nothing will, not even crashing on the isle of *Lost*. Perhaps we will always seem a bit lost, especially if we do not choose to confront our cosmic vertigo, to accept the fate of our universe, to let it expand around us and all through us, even if for only five seconds.