



# An Elemental Thing

*Eliot Weinberger*

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## **An Elemental Thing** Eliot Weinberger

With *An Elemental Thing*, Weinberger turns from his celebrated political chronicles to the timelessness of the subjects of his literary essays. With the wisdom of a literary archaeologist-astronomer-anthropologist-zookeeper, he leads us through histories, fables, and meditations about the ten thousand things in the universe: the wind and the rhinoceros, Catholic saints and people named Chang, the Mandaeans on the Iran-Iraq border and the Kaluli in the mountains of New Guinea. Among the thirty-five essays included are a poetic biography of the prophet Muhammad, which was praised by the *London Times* for its "great beauty and grace," and "The Stars," a reverie on what's up there that has already been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and Maori.

## **An Elemental Thing Details**

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Author : Eliot Weinberger

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# From Reader Review An Elemental Thing for online ebook

## Edmundo Mantilla says

¡Este libro es extraordinario! Está poblado de personajes fascinantes y compuesto por historias muy curiosas. Mis capítulos favoritos fueron los dedicados a las estrellas y al rinoceronte. Weinberger posee un saber inmenso y muy profundo, que logra exponer con delicadeza. ¡Léanlo!

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## Jim Coughenour says

A marvelous (an exact adjective in this case) book of essays, a kind of illuminated bibliography. Weinberger ranges across all types of esoterica - scientific, religious, anthropological, ecological - transmuting dry facts into strange, verifiable abstracts worthy of Borges. In fact I frequently recalled Borges' celebrated set of animal classifications from the imaginary *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*:

1. those that belong to the Emperor,
2. embalmed ones,
3. those that are trained,
4. suckling pigs,
5. mermaids,
6. fabulous ones,
7. stray dogs,
8. those included in the present classification,
9. those that tremble as if they were mad,
10. innumerable ones,
11. those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,
12. others,
13. those that have just broken a flower vase,
14. those that from a long way off look like flies.

Weinberger's essays are composed in the same spirit of implausible variety: an essay on "Changs" (i.e., ancient Chinese men named "Chang"); on the four seasons from the "Emperor's" point of view; on wind, stars, ice and the tree of flowers; on lizards, tigers and the rhinoceros; on St. Teresa, Abu Al-Anbas and Empedocles; and (the best essay) on "The Vortex." Montaigne meets Guy Davenport. Almost perfect.

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## Laura says

"Wonder alone in the vastness of the world" is the last line of this book of essays and sums up an incredible but hard to place book.

Its narrator is an unreliable tour guide who configures cultural peculiarities in cycling incantations and

spontaneous meanderings and musings of cosmology, relics and anthropological themes. It can make a reader lost, but at the end I found my curiosity wrapping in upon itself and creating a truly memorable reading experience.

The closest I can find a comparison is not in a book, but in a place, The Museum of Jurassic Technology outside of LA that is a carefully curated ruse of curiosities.

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### **Tuck says**

pretty amazing creative expositions on a variety of topics but all deal with what it means to be a human, and why we are different than the trees, and stars, but not by much.

plus it's Mike Puma's best books read of 2010.(or ever?!)

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### **Noam says**

Weinberger does pretty amazing things with textually based research that he turns into beautiful essays. The problem is that he exotifies and essentializes in the extreme.

He turns what can be a pretty interesting perspective on the Western gaze of the "Other", into just that: The Western gaze of the other. A few remarks here and there about colonialism, but not much more. The myths and stories he recreates are beautiful, but they remain beautiful objects held up to be admired.

He does do a pretty amazing job with his essay "The Stars," so if you do decide to read this, look out for that one.

This whole book brings up the question of how much freedom a writer should have to take outside materials (especially when they are outside of his own cultural realm) and turn them into his own writing, and what the role of self-censorship should be in that. We can't ignore the fact that at the present moment we have a lot of exposure to "other" cultures and cultural understandings of the world. But these understandings are obtained through a very particular lens. And so, is a writer's only option to write about herself, and her own culture? I think not, but I think there is a way to write much more nuanced creative writing pieces that don't have to use heavy theory to get their ideas across, and tackle the lens through which we view "the other". Weinberger doesn't do that.

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### **Graychin says**

I almost passed over *An Elemental Thing*, despite the lovely cover. The canned praise on the back of it scared me. To believe it, Weinberger's work is totally without precedent, the accomplishment of things yet unattempted in prose and rhyme, the sole flaw in the rule about there being nothing new under the sun.

Weinberger's book isn't really so unprecedented. You could point to whole armies of anthropologists and historians, among others, and maybe to Borges too. God spare us such monsters of spontaneous generation anyway. If it had been truly unprecedented I'm sure I would have hated it. (And here's a lesson for overpraising reviewers: islands are places we like to imagine ourselves bringing a few favorite books, but a

book itself makes a poor island.)

*An Elemental Thing* is a well-curated little museum, worth the price of admission, and Weinberger is a gifted collector. Page after page he holds up curious objects for our consideration without getting himself too much in the way: the recurring Aztec apocalypse, the tiger as symbol and victim, the mysticism of the Taoists, the levitating saints of Italy, the Mandaeans of Iraq, the heathenish folklore of the wren, the ritual life of a Chinese emperor, the Empedoclean follies.

There's such a thing as too much exoticism, however, and Weinberger pushes a bit beyond my limit. I wonder where this immemorial western obsession with the misty East comes from. Weinberger does occasionally sample from nearer to home but he spends more than half the book stepping over the fewmets of other latter-day Orientalists: Pound perhaps, and the dime-a-dozen Zen-pushers of the twentieth century.

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## Jimmy says

3.5 stars. I love creative essays. They usually blend well researched facts with narrative and poetic devices, a la WG Sebald, Anne Carson, and Eula Biss. So I was super excited to find out about Eliot Weinberger, whom I've only read good things about. What's more, this slender book has the most enticing cover design, it made me swoon.

The essays themselves were not exactly what I expected. They are well-researched bite-sized morsels that start with so much potential, but then they end abruptly. It took me a while to catch on to the rhythm of his pieces, and stop expecting any kind of authorial voice to tie everything together. I'm not one who usually wants everything tied up, but these pieces are almost like opening up a suitcase of ephemera. Each one sparkling and fantastic, and perhaps even grouped together in nice combinations. This in itself is often impressive and fun to read, and he ends up saying a lot with his choice of what to include/exclude as well as the order in which he presents them. But, again, this all took getting used to. It was hard to read more than one or two in one sitting because of how distant I felt from the impersonal (though poetic) presentation.

One example: There is an essay called Changs which presents a list of people with the name of "Chang" throughout history, along with a short summary of what they did. In "Stars", he compiles a list of beliefs about the origin of stars through the ages. He includes the scientific ("they interact through four forces: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong and weak nuclear forces") as well as the mythologic ("they are the white ants in the anthill built around the motionless Dhurva, who meditates for eternity deep in the forest") and the poetic ("they are holes in the great curtain between us and the sea of light"). In fact, he does that often: blending poetic myth with scientific or historical fact in a way that makes you think twice about why we DON'T treat them equally. Also, these pieces just jump in with no cumbersome explanations, which is refreshing.

But is there a link between how these essays were written and what the essays were *about*? As I read more and more of this book, I began to appreciate it more and more precisely because I felt that the answer was *yes*.

He often writes about historical or mythological figures, usually from different cultures (China, Greenland, the Mandaeans from the middle east, etc.) and often from cultures that are ignored or that you never hear about. His way of diving into talking about other cultures without explanation or reference makes the reader come face to face with otherness without the familiar comfort of a guide. His Spring/Winter/Summer/Fall

essays do not tell you what culture he is even writing about:

In the third month, the Sun is in the Stomach; at dusk the Seven Stars set, and at dawn the Oxherding Boy; its tree is the pear.

He writes often about cycles in time, and the repetition of basic elements that combine to form the universe:

"in order to fill its expanse, nature must repeat to infinity each of its original combinations or types" p 130

or earlier, talking about Empedocles:

"He believed that the world was made of four roots--earth,water,air,fire--and two forces, love and strife...Everything is sometimes different but perpetually alike, momentary creations that are formed, separate into their immortal elements, and are recombined."

This same cyclic repetition is very much expressed in the way he writes... taking detritus of human culture and recombining them into essays that are highly unique. And the repetition he employs in his lists is reminiscent of the repetition he writes about in the endless cycles of life.

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## **Forrest Gander says**

The best book by our best living literary essayist, *An Elemental Thing* by Eliot Weinberger got scant attention when it was published in 2007. As is sometimes the case with significant American writers, Weinberger's reputation may be greater abroad than at home. Certainly his work has been translated into umpteen languages (including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, and Maori). I recently reread *An Elemental Thing* and was knocked out again and surprised by what I missed the first time.

The book's sequence of short essays covers an astonishing range of subjects, from wind to rhinoceros to lizards, from Aztecs to Romans to Mandaeans. Empedocles and "the ox-herding boy" are presiding spirits of sorts, drifting in and out of multiple essays. Parallel essays elaborating the seasonal activities of a T'ang Dynasty Chinese court give structure to the book as a whole.

What makes the essays so remarkable, besides their astounding learnedness (James Laughlin, the editor of *New Directions*, once said that Weinberger was the most erudite person he'd met since Ezra Pound), is their formal innovation. Each essay is utterly distinct. Everything Weinberger has learned from a lifetime's obsession with poetry he brings to bear on the essay. Laughlin's comparison comes to mind in part because Weinberger has cracked open the essay form in as dramatic a way as Ezra Pound cracked open the poem in the early 20th century.

Precipitous juxtapositions, heuristic leaps, lists, anaphoric incantation, cultural rhymes, onomatopoeia, parallel structures, strong syntactical shifts, refusals of closure, kennings, textual patterning on the page, and merciless understatement characterize the essays. Also, Weinberger empathetically heaps our plate with the facts of life as they are perceived by non-Western cultures, and he does so without relying on those patronizing qualifications—"they believe," etc.—so often used to distinguish non-scientific modes of experience and explanation. Thus, in "Muhammad," we read: "He never soiled his clothes; whatever passed naturally from him was instantly received and concealed by the earth. He never smelled disagreeably, but gave off a fragrance of camphor and musk. At three months, he sat up; at nine months, he walked; at ten

months, he went out with his foster-brothers to pasture the sheep....”

Often elements from one essay are swirled into the configuration of another. For instance, the reader is likely to associate an essay titled “Wind and Bone” with an earlier essay, “The Wind.” In “Wind and Bone,” an advisor tells a Chinese emperor that the wind he feels “is a wind for your majesty alone.” Any reader familiar with Pound’s Cantos will recall Pound’s “No wind is the king’s wind” and link this allusion to Pound references in other essays. Meanwhile, Weinberger goes on to mention Chang Hua, whose name connects him to an earlier essay, “Chang,” concerning (well, you have to read it) a bunch of men named Chang. The last line of “Wind and Bone”—“The metaphor for the ideal poem is a bird”—relates it to an essay called “Wrens.” This cycling of themes and references typifies the movement not only of the essays, but of the writing as a whole. Perhaps the book’s overriding compositional metaphor is the vortex; two of the most compelling essays, “Tree of Flowers” and “Vortex,” develop that image into a cosmogony.

It’s curious to note how ecstasy and carnage often mingle in the final sentences of these essays, despite (or not) that a number of them are concerned with creation. Weinberger tracks cycles of human violence and dreaming as, like huge vortical whirlwinds, they stalk each other across the widening desert tracts of human history.

Finally, though, it’s Weinberger’s attentiveness to particularity, to the particularity of our species, its dreams and literatures and landscapes, that makes the essays so rich. The brilliant net of details that Weinberger casts and recasts in his various inventive approaches to form is precisely what constitutes a superlative poetic imagination. And it’s what holds the essays—and us—trembling and raging and hallucinating together.

I’ll end with a beginning. These are the opening lines of the essay “The Stars”:

The stars: what are they? They are chunks of ice reflecting the sun; they are lights afloat on the waters beyond the transparent dome; they are nails nailed to the sky; they are holes in the great curtain between us and the sea of light; they are holes in the hard shell that protects us from the inferno beyond; they are the daughters of the sun; they are the messengers of the gods; they are shaped like wheels and are condensations of air with flames roaring through the spaces between the spokes; they sit in little chairs;

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## Marie says

Two of my favourite things are:

- 1) Storytelling
- 2) Religious & Cultural Practice

This collection of essays by Eliot Weinberger combines both, so yay! They are all written with a suspension in disbelief that really appeals to me. I will not sum the whole thing because I am lazy and you should read it, but I will do two because I am a friend.

*Where the Kaluli Live* is about a Papua New Guinean tribe, & about how bird calls inflect on their language, & rituals of song. It struck me particularly as yearly ritual was broken by "progress" less than thirty years ago. People alive now would remember it. The rituals are described as so impassioned that to have that passionate, collective experience lost is heartbreaking. It's like hearing that there's only four of a species left - you have *want* to resuscitate this thing, but it is already dead somewhere in time, somewhere so close in time

you already know it's dead without it actually *being* dead. It's incredibly sad and I read it while I was waiting for a sleep test, so I was trying not to make it look like I was crying, or that I might cry. But apparently now I cry when I read books so I have to somehow adapt that to my personal image.

*The Vortex* captures the things I love most about exploring religion. When Weinberger writes on vortexes, he explores the concept of similar thoughts and writing from people in different parts of the world, have come to the same conclusions; he explores how one culture can inform another by shifting itself to be palatable; he explores how belief and culture can form our concept of thought, just as language forms the abilities of our mouths; he explores how one concept can be interpreted so differently by those who read it. I think there's something incredibly cool about how the mind forms its belief systems and moral systems, and, as *The Vortex* focuses on, thoughts on what thought is. It drives me crazy how good this essay is. I would give it 6000 stars and maybe marry it, that's how committed I am to it.

I'm not sure who to recommend this to. People who like the same shit I like? And also everyone else. I also posted a huge ramble about how everyone should read this book on my Studies in Religion uni class discussion board to try and force people into reading it, but you don't have to be as geek about religion as me to be into it. Just do it.

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### **Mike Puma says**

What do you do when you finish a book of extraordinary writing—writing that's unlike anything you've read before? Writing that's caught you up and not turned you loose. Writing that informs, but is beautiful. Writing that leaves you breathless, but not wanting for air, rather wanting for more writing...writing of the kind you're swimming in at the moment.

A normal person would, I suppose (and I have to suppose what it is normal people do...ever...under any circumstance), rush out and tell his friends, tell anyone who'll hold still, shout it to the world. I'm doing that, of course, but being me, I'm also facing a dilemma: where do I house such a singular title in the bookcases of my own library?

*An Elemental Thing* is unlike anything I've read. I have no place to *house* it—on my shelves or in my thinking. To call it a book of essays just doesn't seem right or do it justice; it might be off-putting to those for whom essays aren't the order of the day. Then again, to call them *prose poems* doesn't seem right either, although they're surely poetic and wondrous. I should also mention that Weinberger is an acclaimed translator of Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges and other South American authors, as well as being an acclaimed poet himself and winner the National Book Critics Award for criticism. He is a writer readers should know.

I suspect I'll end up dedicating part of a shelf to the handful of volumes of prose poetry I own and part of the same shelf to the works of Weinberger that I own or expect to own—creating a skimpy-looking shelf in an otherwise crowded library of fiction, poetry, and lit crit. I'm whining and I'll stop.

The entries in this book takes the reader to China and India, to Papua, New Guinea and the Nazca Desert of Peru. They provide the history of the first, second, third, fourth, etc., rhinoceros to arrive in Europe and the fates that befell them. They offer a dizzying history of the vortex in philosophical and scientific thought—as dizzying as Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström." (Did you know the caduceus is part of that history? The DNA double helix?) Would you have imagined that all the star myths could be condensed into a brief six



pages, and would you expect a phrase like, "thier infinitude propels us to count them?" Included is the story of Muhammad and other myths, as well as an inclusive bibliography that informs this volume.

I found this title by sheer good luck and following the reviews of Stephen (above) whose review says it best: "Astonishing, just astonishing."

This is likely the last book I'll finish this year—a perfect one. Having met my goal of 60, this volume has been the culmination of some very, very good reading.

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## **Kris says**

As I sat by my window finishing the last essays in *An Elemental Thing* tonight, a severe storm was raging outside. Dark gray clouds descending, heavy rain pouring down, wild winds driving the water against my windows. During the worst of the storm, it felt like glass and bricks were only a very thin barrier between me and the furies of nature.

The storm transported me into the world of the many Eastern and Western civilizations that Eliot Weinberger explores with elegance, sensitivity, and lyricism in this collection of creative non-fiction essays. Weinberger's title immediately conveys the themes at the heart of this beautifully written collection. Elements in the sense of the main components of nature, earth, air, fire, and water, all serve as the focal point of many of these essays. Throughout the collection, Weinberger explores the meaning that humans have attached to these elemental forces through a dizzying array of myths, folktales, historical chronicles, and other writings.

## **Wu-t'ai Shan Mountain in China**

Many essays are very short, from one page to four pages, and focus on a specific element (such as wind or ice), season, historical figure (including Muhammad), or animal (wrens, tigers, rhinos). Weinberger uses a collaging technique throughout the 35 essays. Key elements and figures appear and reappear throughout the collection, so the careful reader can, for example, compare different cultures' understanding of the wren within the context of their cosmologies. However, Weinberger's method is more subtle than a straightforward essay in comparative religion. As I read deeper into this collection, I sensed profound resonances across centuries and geographical regions. Weinberger anchors these sections a few longer essays, including "The Vortex", which bring together different cultures' understandings of these features, arranged side by side in subsections within the essays. I emerged from this reading with a profound sense of human beings' desperate, and often beautiful, attempts to craft meaning to help them understand, and sometimes control, these forces.

Weinberger's prose is beautiful - sparse, clean, with a timelessness reminiscent of the folktales and myths that served as his sources. For example, consider this passage from "Muhammad": "Light beamed from his forehead, and at night it looked like moonlight. He used amber, musk and civet as perfumes, and spent more money on perfume than on food; days later, people would know from the lingering fragrance that he had passed by. He cast no shadow while standing in the sun. No matter how tall a man was, when he stood beside Muhammad he appeared an arrow's length shorter. No bird ever flew over his head. He could see behind without turning around. He could hear everything while he was sleeping. Water flowed from between his fingers and nine pebbles in his hand sang praises" (158).

Some essays reminded me of Borges in their evocation of a distant world, which is especially fitting as Weinberger has translated him. For example, he writes in this passage from "Spring": "Day and night are equal in length, Weights and measures, balances and instruments are calibrated and standardized. Streams, ponds, and swamps may not be drained; forests may not be burnt. Insignias, skins, and silks substitute for animals in the sacrifices. Gates and doors and temple furnishings are repaired. Three days before the storms begin, messengers are sent out with wooden clappers to inform the people that no one may couple when the thunder roars, for their children will be imperfect, and suffer calamities and evil" (29).

Perhaps my favorite piece is "The Stars," which reads as a prose poem, made up completely of short statements depicting different beliefs about the stars across many different cultures and time periods. Weinberger does not identify the sources of these beliefs. Instead, he strings them together, creating a tapestry of human belief, an attempt to understand the most prominent and basic features in their lives: "The stars: what are they? They are chunks of ice reflecting the sun; they are lights afloat on the waters beyond the transparent dome; they are nails nailed to the sky; they are holes in the great curtain between us and the sea of light..." (171).

This is the other meaning of "elemental" that resonated with me - Weinberger's drawing our attention to the most basic features that form the bedrock of our existence on this planet. Meanings change, idols fall, religions are born and die, scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, mystics and poets posit theories that will be forgotten tomorrow, but the stars, the wind, the mountains, the deserts, all remain, constant and distant and mysterious.

## **Milky Way Galaxy**

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### **Barbara says**

The middle of this book contains an essay on the vortex, and its many manifestations. The physical basis of a whirlpool, for example, is water (and perhaps rocks). But it also requires an additional energy source to turn a pool of water into a whirlpool - "The difference between a whirlpool and a pool is the whirl." (quoting the appropriately named Allen Upward). In physical terms, the vortex at its essence is a wheel or spiral turning. But Weinberger also notes the use of terms like vortices to describe a rush of ideas, or a process of thought.

I do not think it is an accident that the essay on the vortex is tucked somewhere in the middle of the book. The essays that surround it are the basis for his own vortex of ideas. There are common themes - wind, light, bone, seasons, wild animals, stars, and flowering trees - which are arranged in a sort of spiral relationship within the various essays. One example of this is the placement of the various essays on the seasons - spring, summer, fall, winter - throughout the book. Another is the way in which certain topics are introduced in one essay and then returned to in another. The book's structure reminds of another spiral - the spiral galaxy M101. [for a pic, see <http://www.astronet.ru/db/xware/msg/a...>].

It took me a little while to get the hang of what was going on in this book, and again, I think this is intentional. You aren't given a road map, you simply walk into an outer arm of the spiral, work your way into the center, and then ease on back out on the other side. It's unlike anything else I've ever read in that sense.

But what is the book ABOUT, you might ask? The way I see it, it's about the intersection of the natural

world and man's quest for spiritual enlightenment, throughout the ages and across the globe. It was definitely worth the read.

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### **Nicholas During says**

Took me a while to get in to this one but once I did it is a very deep book. Weinberger sure know a lot, hard to tell how he knows it and how much of its factual and how much was tinged with his imagination. But this is exactly, the latter question, what makes the book so good. Stories and histories that come to us from the past, and from other societies and cultures, don't need to be factual to impress us, change us, and expand our understanding of the world and ourselves. This is what literature is and does, and though Weinberger often reads more like an anthropologist or historian than a storyteller, I feel that is what he truly is. The fact that his stories come not from himself, his own experiences or feelings or inner explorations (this is not meant as a dig to many contemporary writers, okay, maybe it is a little) makes this feel fresh and exciting and fun. While it is hard to connect with some characters and places and myths that are very different from the Western ones that we (I) are so used to, I found I didn't need to be an expert on ancient Chinese, Indian, or South American culture to pick up what was going on. Really we just to need to read with open mind and accepting thoughts, the rest will take care of itself.

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### **Mark Broadhead says**

Like an aphoristic Borges or a Sebald without travel. The historical stories are connected, but only slightly or by slight of hand, which is its weakness.

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### **Regan says**

Odd experience reading this polymathic foray into the elemental connectedness of all things at the same time that a majority of U.S. citizens elected a president who has run a campaign based almost entirely on divisiveness. I found it hard to concentrate while reading, focused as it is on a very long view of history, culture, geography that is especially difficult to occupy when one feels the present so pressingly. But still, it served as a good, fascinating and reassuring ballast in troubled times. Worth the price of purchase for the eclectic/esoteric multicultural bibliography alone.

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