

M. E. SILVERMAN

John Mills' Letter of a Radio Engineer to his Son on Electricity and Matter

a found poem

My Dear Son,

I hope you will one day be interested in radio-telephony
and will want me to explain it to you. Here
is the simplest explanation I can give
and still make it possible
for you to listen.

First, plenty of books tell you how and what to do,
but very few waste time. Experiment
for yourself. Be quite familiar with ideas,
with a radio set, copper wires, tinfoil, glass plates,
sheets of mica, metal, wood,
and all kinds of love,
the ability to work, the energy
that runs our batteries,
but what is the real reason
we can use wires, metals, audions, and crystals
in order to send and receive messages?

Simply put: all these things are made of little specks,
too tiny to see called electrons and protons.
How do they differ?
Like us, in size and in laziness,
and this inertia that, as you know,
is the resistance of a body
to changes in momentum,
how it is harder to start, harder to stop
or to change its direction and go
a different direction. Give it a name:
this is the positive-charged proton,
the basic component of all, even you and I,
where an electron always likes to be close to a proton.
All the stuff, or matter, this matter
of our world is made up of two
kinds of building blocks,

and all the blocks are like bricks
because when one builds a house
each must rest on another.
Further, between an electron
and any other electron or between
two protons or between an electron and a proton
there is distance,
enough space
so that lots of others could fit
if only they were willing
to get that close.

Sometimes they do get very close together.
I can tell you how if you will imagine
a group of protons and electrons playing together,
that there are ninety different games they can play
and if a number of atoms join,
form molecules and become a substance,
something big enough to see,
it could be the best possible little atomic group,
a grand picnic in which all are present,
grouped together, behaving,
a sort of game with other groups
playing as large as the moon and the earth,
and many of these actions which we call chemistry
are the result of change,
one molecule to another,
toward a radio you can see
filled with complicated atoms
and little wires carrying currents,
conducting electricity, broadcasting
a sound I hope we might build together.

ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

“John Mills’ Letter of a Radio Engineer to his Son on Electricity and Matter” was created from *Letters of a Radio-Engineer to His Son* by John Mills (1922). About the poem and the process of composing it, M. E. Silverman writes:

I am naturally drawn to words—all words. Sometimes a review or a letter or an old book will catch my eye and ear. It lingers the way the ocean does after you leave. It is then that I know I have to create something to keep it with me. When I came across *Letters of a Radio-Engineer to His Son* by John Mills (1922), I was immediately struck by the poetic language, the imagery, the science, and mostly importantly the affection that pours through for his son.

M. E. Silverman is the author of *The Floating Door* (Glass Lyre 2018). He co-edited *101 Jewish Poems for the Third Millennium* with Nancy Naomi Carlson (Ashland Poetry Press 2021) and *New Voices: Contemporary Writers Confronting the Holocaust* with Howard Debs (forthcoming from Vallentine Mitchell). His work has appeared in *Tampa Review*, *Tulane Review*, *I-70 Review*, *december*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He serves on the board of *32 Poems* and is the senior competitions editor for *Harbor Review*. He lives in Forsyth, Georgia.

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