

## Everything We Don't Know

**Aaron Gilbreath**

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*Essays explore isolation, weaving together the intangible and material touchstones of life periods with remarkable ease.*

Essayist and journalist Aaron Gilbreath excavates memories from his young adulthood through his early thirties in *Everything We Don't Know*. A candid, intense voice polishes obsessions into satisfying considerations on growing into oneself. Threaded with hiking, popular culture, lost histories, drug addiction, and urban landscapes, this collection makes few apologies for past mistakes. Beneath an eternal-boy persona, a surprising tenderness reveals the struggle for human connection.

Standout essays include “Dreams of the Atomic Era,” which considers midcentury Googie architecture in Phoenix, Van Buren Street’s descent into Skid Row, and the author’s nostalgia for his parents’ youth, all while exemplifying the intricate layering of scenes that characterizes the book. “Ancient History” presents an affectionate portrait of an uncle whose undiagnosed problems resulted in a lifetime of eccentric behavior. The essay skillfully tracks the author’s progression from feeling shame to accepting his relative. “It’s Really Something You Should Have Examined” depicts a cross-country move to New York with a ferret and girlfriend, pairing the fate of the ferret with the increasing unease in a relationship marked by everyday differences. Measured pacing and apt reflections steadily build tension.

Lighter but no less intriguing essays include “/’ra-di-ke!”, a dissection of a 1980s slang term that revels in enduring, recyclable language. “Leaving Tatooine” features the sale of Star Wars figurines and quickly spirals into a contemplation of aspirations and loss. Gilbreath weaves the intangible and material touchstones of an era with remarkable ease, allowing nostalgia and amusement to mingle with the burden of hindsight. In one memorable line, referring to an idealized childhood, he remarks, “I want to go back there. We can never go back there.”

Whether writing on relationships that failed or on achieving sobriety, stoners in movies, or John Muir, these essays explore isolation. They also illuminate facets of Generation X—notably its storied, often typecast sense of malaise and dependence. When rock bottom moments arrive, Gilbreath captures them with searing self-awareness. That knowledge often arrives too late adds to the moving sense of dissolution.

*Everything We Don't Know* demonstrates the pain of sometimes misguided perceptions, and the many routes an insatiable mind can take.

KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2017)

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