



Pieces of Payne

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As an award-winning poet, Albert Goldbarth has made his reputation by writing imaginative and adventurous verse. He always has been more than willing to venture forward into the unknown, to take on challenges that seem as infinite as the universe. *Pieces of Payne* is Goldbarth's first novel, and he employs all of the exuberance that has served him well as a poet to explore a vast array of topics. The novel opens with a professor by the name of Albert meeting with one of his former students, Eliza Phillips, in a bar. They will spend the evening downing several drinks and catching up on what life as dealt young Eliza. Albert serves as the novel's narrator and listens intently to Eliza as she speaks of her parents' divorce, her quest to be an astronomer and to follow in the footsteps of the amazing scientist Cecilia Payne, her own divorce, and her decision to abandon astronomy in order to teach science at the grade-school level.

Cecilia Payne is the "Payne" in the title of the novel. She was a pioneer scientist who married a Russian astronomer. Eliza did her best to be an almost carbon copy of Cecilia Payne, even going so far as to marry a Russian astronomer. Eliza's father was an oncologist who treated breast cancer and had affairs with vulnerable women. At the end of the evening, it is revealed that Eliza secretly has married another woman in a quiet lesbian ceremony and that she is worried whether she may become another victim of breast cancer. The story runs no more than eighty pages, but Goldbarth has included more than a hundred pages of "Notes." While the characters Albert and Eliza share intimate details over drinks, the author has inserted footnotes in the text in order to expand this tale into a million pieces.

As always, Goldbarth takes the reader in all directions at once. There are references to science, science fiction, literature, comic books, history, popular culture, and art. There is even a touching "afterword" and an informative "acknowledgments" section. *Pieces of Payne* is clever, heartbreaking, at times a mess, but never less than vintage Goldbarth.

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