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## Tiny Supernovas

Jesse Jay Ross  
*University of Central Florida*



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TINY SUPERNOVAS

by

JESSE JAY ROSS

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term  
2010

Dedicated to my Angie.

## ABSTRACT

This work seeks to expose the truth in as many different forms as possible. As the title, *Tiny Supernovas*, suggests, it is influenced by the concept of the explosions of super-massive stars. This explosion is known as a supernova. It is only through a supernova, only through the death and subsequent explosion of one of the largest sequence of stars, that we obtain many of the elements necessary for life here on earth. All heavy metals come from supernovas. Everything we and our planet are made from comes from these explosions. Yet, there is a similarly prolific release of energy and materials from each human life. If viewed from the great beyond, on a consistent basis, what seem to be a sort of movie of our individual lives would actually be a stream of light reflecting off our bodies and from the things around us. This light is sent out in all directions; thus, we too are sending signals out, like tiny supernovas. This collection is an insight into the inside of one of those tiny supernovas.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTIST'S STATEMENT	1
PART ONE: TINY SUPERNOVAS	5
View of the Universe from the Backseat	6
Stars Gazing	7
Remembering Poetry	9
Slow Day	11
The Moon Dies Everyday	13
The Last Ever Launch of the Space Shuttle	14
What's for Breakfast	17
PART TWO: MYTH OF THE OPEN ROAD	20
I Am an Engine	21
Love Your Engine	26
Almost Perfect	28
Under the Assumption that One Is a Machine	29
Two Commuting Bicyclists Passing	31
My Vintage Bike, a Cherry Apple Red Leg Propelled Arrow	32
PART THREE: BARDOS	33
Imagination, How Can You Be So Stupid? (Galations 3:3)	34
An Important Literary Magazine	37
Tire Swing	40
A Bomb in a Tree	43
Bardos	45
Should I Buy a Beehive?	47
PART FOUR: PATER FAMILIAS	49
Pater Familias	50
Labor Day	52
Stones	53

True Stories	55
Sofie Eats an Apple	56
Good Friday	57
When the Baby Weighed Enough	59
Chrysalis on Your Fourth Birthday	60
To You, Baby, Laughing at Your Big Sister	61
The Skyscraper	62
The Morning of the Marathon	64
The Man I Was When I Was a Boy	65
Measuring	67
Black Snake	69
One of Our Old Special Bowls Has a Crack	70
Unlike an Apple	71
Empty Egg	72
Happily Married Teacher	73
A Sonnet for Your Rack	74
Welcome Back KY	75
Veins	76
The Same Feeling	77
I Do Not Always Love You	78
The Road	80
WORKS CITED	81



## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

One of my earliest memories is of my little brother Joey and myself, perched on stools out behind the house, on the small cement slab that was our back porch. It was summer in Florida, when all the sun and all the rain makes the grass very green and the air very thick and hot. We had found a blank cassette tape and a silver ghetto blaster, so we were re-recording Alice and Wonderland. Running around with names like Ass in Wonderland, like Tweedley Dee Dick (who, with his brother, Tweedley Dumb Dick, had somehow made his way from Through the Looking Glass), they didn't really do anything in the story except exist as profane versions of themselves. But they did something outside the story. They made us laugh until our mouths hurt from laughing.

In high school, I was kicked out of English III my Junior year because of making people laugh; it was because of a poem I had written about Santa Clause. I don't remember all of it, but I remember the line, "he smelled like B.O. and rotten catfish." During this time, I was also in a punk rock band, writing songs like "Peggy the Nun," who got pregnant and had to leave the nunnery, and "Frankie Valentino," a fictional student who was absent from school because he died in a fire. And then at UCF, when I studied fiction more in depth, I created characters like Bryce Dubber, the victim of an unwanted intervention for his homosexuality. Studying creative nonfiction forced me to look backward and inward for characters, for situations, for story. Most importantly, I have come to realize over the years, it forced me to look. And when I look around now, what comes out is poems. When I write them now, what I am doing is the same thing I have been doing since I was on the back porch with my little brother. I am entertaining.



Yet, my motivation is to do more than entertain. And it is to do more than mere speaking to someone. It is to speak in a way that allows me to share beauty by capturing things that are beautiful. These things include situations, perspectives, moments, realizations, connections to others. I find things that I would like to capture, like a certain truth (for instance the idea that Newton's Laws are absolute, so two things in a vacuum come together, and how that is so similar to a single mother raising her daughter and how they must lean on each other). Then when I can find the time I sit down with a bottle of beer or a glass of wine and I carve a little memento out of these things with words. When I'm done, sometimes I am moved to tears, sometimes my heart skips a beat. Basically, I am done when I have said what it is I set out to say. But I also understand and subscribe to Marcel Duchamp's idea of readymades. I believe that found art is a major foundation of art, involving the artist's sensibility as much as that which he or she creates, and I think that found art is what is happening when a poem takes on a shape of its own. So while I may be setting out to expose a certain truth to light, I might accidentally find something else beautiful there. And I don't think that's wrong. I think when we create art we are creating beautiful things. Ultimately, my motivation is to create beautiful things.

While the perception of what is beautiful (what is art) might be innate, the perception of what is good craft is shaped by what is taken in by the artist. I have included at the end of this document a list of books that have been influential in the creation of my idea of art (informed by the craft I used to create it). For instance, although *Winesburg, Ohio* is a novel, Sherwood Anderson has been influential to me as a poet because of his plain and unpretentious voice. Kurt Vonnegut's novels each had a similar influence. But *Timequake* is not listed for voice alone: in this novel, Vonnegut exposes the beauty of such seemingly hidden yet obvious ideas as a man

leaving prison and trying to work hard to build himself back up. He does so with so few and such beautiful brushstrokes. Similarly, *Breakfast of Champions* is included for both its metafictional qualities as well as its simple diction.

John Berryman's poems have been tremendously helpful in validating my ideas of how to create the rebar and concrete of my poems. Many of his poems rhyme in simple ways and have almost sing-songy rhythm, yet they are very sad. I find it beautiful to use these ancient cadences to get across ideas of nontraditional beauty. Conversely, Tomas Tranströmer has been influential in his ability to stack a series of complex meanings throughout the stanzas to ultimately arrive at a precipice. And Alice Randall, bell hooks, and the cowboy poet Baxter Black, though writing in prose, are coming at their work from nontraditional ways; they expose art itself, philosophy, and story (respectively) in refreshing ways that offer new insight (and, therefore, new art).

The Dalai Lama's *Mind of Clear Light: Advice on Living Well and Dying Consciously* is included because it has forced me (as have other Buddhist writings not included in this document) to think about death realistically. Much of my work comes from the perspective that I see and accept an end to life. Indeed, my entire philosophy as an artist is based on this premise.

I have read Hawkings' thoughts on the fourth dimension, which is simple. It's just that there is also a dimension in time, which is linear. My artistic philosophy is that if you were to step away from this fourth dimension and look at all the people along that plane (I picture them as lights), and if you could somehow code which ones were poets and dancers, painters and sculptors (perhaps, they could be blue or pink lights), it would be a very different picture than the artists that were anthologized. In fact, so few artists are anthologized or even remembered for each time period (and I'm speaking from the perspective of hundreds of years from now) that it

seems futile to actively try for any sort of notoriety, for in each great movement in literature, even the smallest percentages of the most literate people only study a handful of writers, so we can simplistically say that our poet laureates and our Stephen Kings will be remembered and the rest just won't.

The futility of immortalization through anthologization shouldn't be looked at as a ceiling for artists, though. Rather, it should be viewed as a window. The freedom that comes with the acceptance that what you do as an artist won't be remembered makes writing like dance: beautifully fleeting. In this way, it becomes as temporary as the moments it seeks to immortalize.

I hope that the work I have created, while lasting quite a bit longer than a two-hour dance performance, can offer the same enjoyment to at least some small audience (if I'm lucky!) of a few hundred years.

## PART ONE: TINY SUPERNOVAS

## **View of the Universe from the Backseat**

Your mother drove, because it was a date  
for us kids. She got blonde highlights and curled  
her hair, which glowed a dashboard green and swirled  
like “The Scream.” She reeked of makeup she might  
wear for adult dates she’d like to invite  
to her pale, clean bed, which had one side cold  
for years, except when you woke up and crawled  
in, your gravity knowing she needed that.

I wonder if your mother ever read  
Newton’s thoughts on two objects placed in space,  
in a vacuum, how they will coalesce  
as if abandoned in the great black void,  
a waking child in outer space driven  
to mother, on earth as it is in heaven.

## Stars Gazing

I have never even seen  
my daughter's face, only the weak light  
fleeing from it--the cornea processing reflections. If an alien  
had a strong enough telescope,

it could see the same light  
coming from my daughter on the playground.

It could see the moment the baby  
girl first came outside, 3 days old.

The light bouncing off that baby,  
creating an image of a soft, pink, wrinkly face, huddled  
in white, green, and red striped hospital blankets,  
shoots off like dandelion seeds into a starry infinity, small  
as it is, without stopping.

Imagine a photo where the aperture  
is left open, and the lights create neon lines  
on the developed photo.

This is what we are--  
reflections to the stars--

in a black river of time,  
neon lines of light.

Glow worms turn on, then back into the ground they go,  
but what's inside them, the stars will never know.

## Remembering Poetry

A special freedom came with the ancient mind  
of the prehistoric humans kind  
holding the roaring orange drips of sunlight  
of a captured forest fire.

You remember.

Some danced with their warm, waving arms. Some sung  
around the carrion and fire.

But the poet crafted not pots, not finger-painted walls, but instead  
his craft was presented in their heads.

He gave them the river Lethe, the dragon's breath.

He gave them gods and men that cheated death.

All the things you've never seen.

And goddesses.

Goddesses

that spun them into theorizing,

twirling out into planets,

spiraling into galaxies,

diving into atoms.



And they set fires.

As children, poetry was for you and me,  
the A-line dress, before the class reciting poems  
to our little eyes, our little ears, combed hair, pressed clothes before PE  
would stoke our primal fires

burning out from inside the crayon-scented classroom  
up, out, outside, into the humid insect-laden grass, room  
to run, to emulate the hunt  
of our ancestral fires,  
adrenaline, we theorized it was, boiling in us  
and we in a circle just popping a red rubber ball on a retired parachute.

For every chrysalis we find  
that dies, we send sound waves squiggling out into space,  
into infinity, past quasars, through quarks,  
and into the fires on the other side of civilization,  
leaving only the noise of words  
the dents of them wrinkling an invisible fabric.

## Slow Day

Today, I don't think my ideas are going to tornado  
out into any oil paintings, arabesques, or rocket  
ships. No, today is a day that I possess the words  
of one with standing lips.

Coming to America, a second language  
learner has a "silent stage." No talking,  
she just listens. Tentative like a movie on mute,  
her lips are just preparing to dance.

\*

At times I find myself on a new shore,  
the earth teaching me to speak.

Once I heard a thump on the roof of my car.  
It was a pigeon plummeting from the sky, headless and gutted.  
A hawk had got it.  
The earth is teaching me its language  
and in its language the translation for thump  
is "competition," and also, "me."



## **The Moon Dies Everyday**

The moon disappears when scattered clouds  
huddle in front of it (Sometimes, it's not  
merely hiding back there.). The wind blew it away.  
Or it might as well have.

There are men in China that hide behind  
clouds and never come back, in Boston, in Florida,  
sneaking away from our lives, the little rascals,  
tiptoeing offstage.

Some of it doesn't disappear though, like Santa  
Clause. If children believe and they never find out,  
he doesn't die. He goes on, up in the North Pole,  
watching the child say goodbye.

Sharp lines of sunlight burst through our blinds: it's daytime.  
Suddenly the moon is gone for good. Almost as big as the earth,  
(one sixth is not nothing) but to the living it's the same exact size  
as a thumbnail or a single frame on a filmstrip.

## **The Last Ever Launch of the Space Shuttle**

If you had friends on the Space Coast,  
the launch of the last space shuttle  
was all over your Facebook:  
like a strip of film, hundreds of identical  
squares, pixelated pictures they took  
with their iPhones.  
fuzzy blue squares,  
each one showcasing a single orange bubble of flaming solidness, each one  
a square blue nest with a clump of downy Phoenix's feathers  
off-centered with the little white profile-status as its frame.

Back when I was growing up in Cape Canaveral  
my dad had his own pawn shop with floor to ceiling glass,  
old-fashioned windows, sugary looking, non-tempered  
glass. Fifteen of them total.

Out of nowhere, the giant sugary slabs would rattle  
in their panes like angry monolithic gods in jungle temples,  
You'd walk outside, hands in your pockets,  
and watch a fluffy white worm climb up the outer edge of the sky.  
The tip looked like the flame on a Bic lighter.

But at the top if it, which you could never see,  
were astronauts.

astronauts, for me, were in the same club as:  
cowboys,  
firemen,  
and ballerinas.

They were real.

That morning the last shuttle went off,  
when the dawn was greeted  
by the men and women in Cape Canaveral  
who were all the boys and girls  
with me when the Challenger exploded,  
when my second grade teacher,  
Miss Driskell,  
literally pulled out  
her gray hair and cried in front of the whole class,  
when all those grown-up girls and boys  
went outside shuffling in their flip flops, with their eyes  
all puffy from sleep, wrapped up in blankets,

sticky salt air on their sleep-sticky lips,  
curling up in bathrobes and snapping pictures  
of the black sky with a ball of fire  
falling upwards,  
some were probably even crying,  
but I had a very important meeting with someone from downtown  
Orlando, and we talked about  
transportation infrastructure,  
community sustainability, and pedestrians.

Fifty miles away in Cape Canaveral, the old stone gods,  
those sugary glass windows of my dad's pawnshop  
shook in their panes.

## What's for Breakfast

Here is a winter breakfast: biscuits and buttered grits,  
scrambled eggs, a cup of sausage gravy, and crispy bacon.  
It is the time for getting fat. It is the time for hibernation.

In summertime, when I wake up, I'm warm.  
And I walk outside before I even think to eat.  
The morning air in summertime is thick  
with wickedly chattering bugs  
hiding in stacks in the thickets of trees.  
my breakfast is strawberries and cottage cheese.

A winter breakfast, though, is made to comfort me, for the sky  
is gray and lumpy. Very much like oatmeal.  
And it seems almost to fall--  
Very much like the yolks  
Of soon-to-be-fried eggs--  
slowly, the sky acting like God's empty parachute,  
it seems so much lower  
and so much closer, and so much easier to touch  
than the limitless blue summer skies,  
under which I eat strawberries and cottage cheese.



This gray sky doesn't seem like it will end too soon,  
this looming, corpse-colored, all encompassing, cover.

Long ago, our ancestors,  
The ones that invented heaven, also  
thought the gray sky  
was a ceiling that was too low in wintertime.

Long ago, they ate huge chunks of mammoth,  
wondering why they kept eating,  
even though they were full.

Just like you.

It was because they were depressed  
cavemen, calloused hands  
despondently holding  
their furrowed brows.

We're not like cavemen.

We know

we eat

because we get depressed.

But maybe it's just to get fatter?

Make it through

the bitter winter better?

And we human beings

are wondrous machines

made out of meat

set up with sensors built in

to make us feel upset

and therefore eat

to save ourselves.

## PART TWO: MYTH OF THE OPEN ROAD

## **I Am an Engine**

I.

Guess what waits beyond the horizon, white as  
breaking waves, as dry as the leftover salt if  
Father Ocean faded away. A quiet room  
we'll be in together.

It's okay. I think it's a nice room. Daughters  
at my side, caressing my ego, maybe  
lots of flowers (motionless but still fleeting,  
dying for voyeurs).

I am timelessly still, like sand, like bits of  
anthracite, like limestone, like shells and fossils,  
gnarled rocks and roots underneath the earth, there  
hiding like the truth.

Honest things can travel through time, so I will  
hide inside the silence between the ticks and  
tocks of my watch, ducking beneath golden gears,  
clicking the years back,

bending certain corners on pages, leaving  
sticky notes around so that I might find them  
telling me, at 80, 40, 30  
what to remember.

II.

Daughter, understand that my faded hands will  
always feel this big, how they are today, when  
you can barely pick yourself up with your hands.  
So I'll do the lifting.

Something happened on the day I bought  
a bike to haul you girls,

It didn't run on gasoline,  
and neither did my lawn  
mower. They were both powered  
by me. I am an engine, so,

the day I go outside and find  
there's no more grass to mow

I'll ride my bike until the light  
has no place left to go

and flickers in the clover  
like a sparkler  
left by a child  
to extinguish itself.

I'll run until my heart is popping  
right out of my chest--walk until the darkness of  
passersby in automobiles  
splashing past in the rain  
whirs me into brushstrokes of black  
within the shadows of the trees  
whose leaves I smell  
mixing with the smell of my own sweat.

And when those trees survive a storm  
and wind is howling through,

I'll ride it back to where it's warm:

my summer hauling you.

III.

You never wondered why we took the bike  
instead of driving cars. How could you know?

Arms hanging slack by your seat in the back,  
as you girls sang "Go, daddy, go!"

you thought

that I was only hot

because I was the one

who made the wind blow.

The day I go outside and find

there's no more grass to mow,

I'll ride my bike until the light

has no place left to go

and hide inside the wind I made

before you ever knew

that's where I'd stay, that's where I'll be.

I'll be there pulling you.



## Love Your Engine

Just like lanky two-headed stalks of Bahia  
grass will bend (as if individuals) in  
every blowing wind, bowing to greet  
the scythe that will come,

we bow too. It's a limbo dancer's bend,  
ducking back below the blade, eluding  
nature's harvest, laughing about it even,  
lonely as windrows,

treating it like it's a cartoon version,  
a goofy reaper. Even if it's not silly,  
it's silly. Picturing a man with a scythe  
for only one stalk.

More than silly, it's a romantic notion.  
How absurd it is to conceive a reaper  
hunting one stalk: Odysseus's ocean  
plotting against him.

Careful not to blunt the blade with soil

the skilled user passes the scythe as close  
to the ground as possible, cutting each stalk  
milliseconds apart for the user,  
years apart for the grass.

I remember going to the city pool--  
we had to have a buddy. Mine was Paul.  
We held hands and jumped in, and the water soaked  
both of us at once.

We were together, each of us knowing  
an underwater all by himself, knowing  
only his own arms flapping like  
blurry wings in slow motion.

## **Almost Perfect**

I ride my bike past a house  
with a rotten, red leather chair  
hanging off the curb for the garbage men.

It is the house of a former student,  
an overweight boy whom I forgive in this moment  
for nagging me with questions after school, each day, for one year.

Around the corner I turn, and the road ribbons up into the clouds,  
winding like a gray rainbow or an interstate in Los Angeles,  
and droplets of water pepper my morning-fresh face;  
they momentarily fool me into believing I know the difference between heaven and earth.

## Under the Assumption that One Is a Machine

I.

Winter sun rising  
just beyond my handlebars  
summer hibernates.

II.

Springtime jasmine blooms,  
scents I would never notice  
if I didn't bike.

III.

( It is difficult  
to write compelling haiku--  
Unenlightened Man)

IV.

Peeking at the sun

rising over my shoulder,

cars seem like cages.

V.

Biking at sunrise.

Cars are rushing to “get there.”

I am happy here.

## Two Commuting Bicyclists Passing

Turn the doorknob quietly, lift the frozen  
handlebars and seat by their stems,  
bounce the tires once it has crossed the threshold,  
wedded to quiet.

Now you are riding to work. You go fast. An explosion:  
morning air untouched by the sun like water splashed  
into face, ears, white noise like the crashing of waves  
mimics the silence.

Light through sycamores and the leaves of  
live oak snap underneath. The handlebar mustache man you  
pass each morning

recognizes you're not in your usual spot,  
nods and says, "You beat me today." You're early.  
Only you and he understand the timing,  
solid and broken.

## **My Vintage Bike, a Cherry Apple Red Leg Propelled Arrow**

a guy yells, "you're not a car."

I yell, "fuck off, faggot," (which should not go in a poem, but I did, I yelled it)

and then I am riding home. I've only had two drinks.

But it has hit me hard, and I am needing to urinate.

And I stop because I am secluded on a bicycle trail, away from everyone,

and I can see the cars,

and they can only see my bike lights,

not me, standing there beside it

and you wouldn't believe the dignity

as I stood there urinating.

## PART THREE: BARDOS



## **Imagination, How Can You Be So Stupid? (Galations 3:3)**

Imagination, how can you be so stupid? (Galations 3:3)

Fly away and trace the arc of the planet  
floating over sheets of ubiquitous sand  
skipping like river stones over glassy seas and  
you'll see in Iraq as big as dinner plates  
camel spiders

freaky-leggedly creeping after soldiers  
trying to hide in their long shadows to steal  
into the crick between the heels and soles of boots  
to escape the heat of the pharaohs The spiders  
also know of the damage

of the sun which will one day die and swallow  
us inner planets Spiders try to befriend  
men not get them You expect such malice  
of creepy crawlies but a friendship is the truth  
of my imagination

where these which have the bodies of spiders

have the essence of house cats soldiers petting  
their hairy spindly legs their heads tilted  
they smile wistfully remembering boyhood  
kittens they cuddled.

## II

Drinking beer with a Platoon Sergeant friend  
Independence Day evening 2010  
we talk about our jobs. What is in his mind  
when I talk about students? When he writes “die”  
on bombs in chalk

because he has to. It is a necessity.  
Just like camel spiders are not really his friends.  
They’re just two bright lights in the dark of night  
or a tan daytime figure macabre and awkward  
contorting towards him.

There are other things, private things, too.

And then there are rats. Like here. And different truth.

It is a truth like a child wanting to sleep

in the dark but not wanting to turn out the light.

I told two soldiers how a regular, stateside spider jumped on my face

and both of them were nice about it.

## **An Important Literary Magazine**

I.

Living room: An Important Literary Magazine,  
drinking, and doing laundry. The buzzer  
for the dryer went off again. The poems  
were very good (perhaps like this one).

The den: still reading, drinking, laundry.

This poem is confusing, syntax is scary.

Alphabetic representational equivalent of post-expressionist  
painting of vaginas. Dryer's buzzer.

Dining room: Trying to write weird  
poem. Feeling scared and actually a little  
unstable. There are some rules we should follow.

Buzzer. Again.

This is not going where you think it is going.

Outside: classical guitar. dusk. bats.

It turns night. It is dark. There are mosquitos

but, also, bats. There are guitars.

There are no poems. No buzzers.

Even Pat Methany never freaked me out  
like this, like peering into a mirror that warps  
into a pool of quicksilver (ever-changing  
like a devil, charming and beautiful  
like a devil) like that poem did.

I am afraid of the grip I'll lose,  
so I am afraid to look at it again.

I am still afraid to look at it again.

II.

Some poems do things to my head  
and I can't imagine what

other forms of art would do to me  
what poetry does.

I think a dancer doing things  
like making Ls with arms

and making scary faces,  
dressed in lycra. Maybe that.

## Tire Swing

I pulled down Christmas lights from an oak tree  
whose bark absorbed the green cord as it grew  
around it. Copper wire sliced out from its sheathing  
into my fingers.

I was snapping sticks for autumn kindling,  
and a spear of wood scraped the skin off my wrist.

Obviously, it's time for gloves.

Our hands are only naked  
to touch each other.

\*

I take my shoes off when I go inside my house,  
where my feet will be naked  
even though my hands are still covered.  
I take off my gloves.  
The blood dried like smudges of dirt.

\*

Pushing Viv and Sofie on the tire swing,  
thoughts of dinner on the stove. I stop  
pushing them for a moment. Then I know  
I'll want to keep this.

I keep pushing them.

But aren't beans important, too? All day long.  
Slowly. They've cooked in their sea salt and pepper  
brine. They will be so tender. But also tough  
because that's how I like them.

This is a hill of beans I'm talking about.  
According to folk knowledge, it doesn't matter.  
But maybe all the sayings of folks are distractions  
like oncoming headlights.

Nobody passes down information that matters,  
so let me pass this down.

I think my heart will bleed through my shirt



because it will try to reach for all sorts of moments in my life.

## **A Bomb in a Tree**

The fine print on batteries always warned  
Not to expose them to an open flame,  
So I thought that if I ever burned  
One it would be like an atom bomb.

It wasn't. From how far away we sat  
In the canoe, we could barely see  
The tiny orange sparkle of light  
In the crotch of a mangrove tree

For the December white sky above  
Catching the lagoon's light breakers  
Like the sharp white heads of doves  
Of concert fans, where on stage the speakers

Dwarf the band you never catch  
A glimpse of—that's how it was  
With the bomb I made—a wick attached  
By melting candle wax to a D size

Battery, all purple in a turdlike clump

On top of the thing—it couldn't  
Have worked. But we waited. That warm lump  
Of coal, puberty, supplanted

That waiting lump in my throat,  
Remembering how minutes before  
The one girl in that rocking boat  
Yanked her shorts down to prove she had hair.

## **Bardos**

A new people have approached me,  
and shaken their sticks of rattling  
bones, and traded me beads for  
polished stones, sneaking in  
to my backyard, using the aegis of  
brown rabbits that creep in every morning  
when everyone but me is still  
and quietly sleeping.

They don't believe in bodies.  
Just that spirits haunt 200 lb machines  
riveted together with muscle and bone.  
They believe in machines made out of meat.

They poisoned my eyes with powdered sweat  
and stole the value of everything  
by putting it

in their purses  
trimmed in leather straps  
and shells, donning feather caps and quills,  
carving arrow tips and hills  
with hammers made of bone  
hard enough to crack  
away the wilderness  
from feral children.

They howl at me, laughing like hungry mothers  
laugh at men complaining when it rains.

## **Should I Buy a Beehive?**

It's not that I am scared of a beehive  
bustling, buzzing in my backyard--  
it's only trying to survive,

this frantic hundreds of hexes, driven to contrive  
that honey food--one redeeming part  
(it's not that I am scared) of a beehive.

I want to watch them seethe. Because I've  
arrived somewhere to let down my guard.  
I'm only trying to survive

Though, just like bees I also used to strive  
for more, I've found some goals can tear your wings apart--  
It's not that. I am scared. Of a beehive,

not so much. I am like a bee that has no drive  
for honey, just spring air through which I dart.  
It's the only trying to survive

thing that gets me like a chair of knives,  
resting as complacency cools my heart.  
It's not that I am scared of the beehive.

## PART FOUR: PATER FAMILIAS



## **Pater Familias**

My daughter just finished her first chapter book!

she's only five years old and she ran to tell me

as I was standing in the bathroom.

She'd drawn a brown mouse on the cover.

I had just read William Shakespeare's Sonnet 55, where

he immortalizes some

person he loved. So, I'd like to see

if I gave you that moment, her running in, if you could keep it under lock

and key, and when you open it, there will be like a deck

of cards made of all the moments you've ever seen,

like a film reel of all of it, even the dumb

stuff. Thank you for letting me keep it here,

with the rest of your stuff. I'd like you to keep this there

too: I was a teenager once

and I used to hand my wife some

random thing, saying, will you hold this for me?

Like just for a second, right?

But I wouldn't ever take it back!



## Labor Day

You sunned under American flag balloons  
festooned along the screened-in porch, bubbles  
breezing by aunts smoking at the table.  
You too looked as if you would pop soon,  
nine months pregnant and ripe—we relished the sun  
for the kids in the pool, for how it was able  
to light the bubbles like UFOs that wobble  
in the wind, seeming to sink and rise on their own—  
Then you were sleeping after giving birth  
to Viv, and I was with some gray-haired  
midwife bathing a newborn who was scared,  
pink, wrinkled hands dwarfed by the girth  
of my finger, wailing and wobbling and wet  
and glistening hours before she'd see the sunlight

## **Stones**

I

My wife drops blood into the toilet water, a sign for us  
that she no longer carries a child. It's in the master bathroom.  
I won't remember when I'm older, but I will still remember  
when I'm half asleep.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, a tightness will come to my chest. I'll brail walk to  
the bathroom across  
the house—no pink water to rise from midnight fairytales, like  
the water in that make-believe bottle  
where a raven (who crafted all men out of stone) drops pebbles  
from its black beak one at a time.

II

My first child once reached  
up to give me a white stone:  
It was her first gift.

Now the baby hands

me stones. I lost her sister's  
years before she grew.

I save white stones, shells and sand  
dollars, buildings and ghosts, blood

and cocoons; I save them like  
wheat pennies in jars.

## True Stories

When an airplane skims overhead, it seems  
to shoot past like a silver pterodactyl  
that no one told about its physical  
limitations, so it can fly like it dreams

flying might be—a shiny dart that streams  
along the edge of our blue spherical  
ceiling—while from inside one, you'd watch it crawl  
above the clouds like a caterpillar.

Maybe relative position from the ground  
isn't what makes that plane seem faster,  
but it's the crashing, the possible disaster  
up there. Like a story on the news. They find

a child dead, and we can't see it, how a family that lost  
a part of itself howls, sleep-running from a ghost.

### **Sofie Eats an Apple**

Sofie eats with four front-teeth

a Fuji apple—by herself.

At first she tears the skin:

Piranha bites as she breaks in, and soon

her nose and cheeks gleam with pulp.

She gums big chunks, pungent apple breath

blooming like an orange blossom

blooms the scent of Florida sun

and bees and those perfuming groves

on the side of I-95—she gives

pause. She gives thoughtful looks

to this, her first apple meat, she reflects

light off her tiny wet nose, and holding

the new fruit up for me to try, her arm

branching too fast to my full-grown form,

the apple eclipses her tiny wet hand.

## Good Friday

Not in a state of grace,  
I sit in the farthest pew  
with my baby daughter  
in a church dress.

The old man in the pew  
in front of us reaches as if about to  
apply some stale Holy Water  
to a liver spot on his head,  
adjusts his hearing aid,  
and does a half-turn back  
as my daughter makes  
chirping noises. Father  
Luís bows to the alter  
as my daughter belts a yelp:  
“Fish.” More half-turns  
make me question whether  
eighteen months is old enough  
to sit through the symbolic death  
of a Savior. And so we exit  
but I do not sign the cross  
in case we’re coming back.



I tense my shins, toe the floor  
to stop myself and to exit  
properly, to mute the chirping  
in my fellow parishioners' ears,  
but decide to go back in as  
my daughter is suddenly mute  
and transfixed with the priest:  
he hoists a colossal crimson silk  
to the apex of the dim cathedral,  
the red cloth climbing the crucifixion  
as slowly and softly as a father's apology  
mouthed to a crowd  
as he exits with child.

## **When the Baby Weighed Enough**

Tiny sailboats on the doctors' wall dotted  
our periphery like cartoon armadas  
boasting victory— pennant-like they floated  
home—and we were the king and queen, our daughter  
at a healthy weight--the proof was written  
down! At every visit, no less! And their wonderful scales,  
those shiny triple-beam weights teetering like leaden  
seagulls on swells before alighting in high percentiles.

But somewhere on their wall there was a rip  
that I didn't notice until they X'd the sheet  
Failure to Thrive. It was as if a pirate ship  
tore out from behind some tiny red sailboat,  
as if Captain Hook at last succeeded in his row  
to catch himself a child who wouldn't grow.

### **Chrysalis on Your Fourth Birthday**

A friend had given you a living surprise  
for your birthday, a caterpillar, who'd creep  
the walls of a Plexiglas box the size  
of a human heart on our countertop,  
eating from broken leaves kept fresh  
in the refrigerator. We missed  
it. The inching of his gold bottlebrush  
body up long, deep-green, glossy leaves just  
became the past, leaving the clear, machined  
flat polymer edge of his cubic home  
littered with a nasty little browned  
thing: a perfect, folded labial crumb.  
The birthday party also came and went  
like that cocoon, half surprise and half lament.

## **To You, Baby, Laughing at Your Big Sister**

Freeze. Right there. You sputtering and pony-tailed  
Tinkerbell, you new potty-trainer, you baby.  
See those tiny arms, grasping for those stairs?  
Worshiping her? That's your big sister, closer  
to your size than me, even way up there. She twirls  
our dog in circles, dancing a pasodoble  
to piano laughter, to puppy growls.

You better be nice to her. Remember  
that staircase, that reach, makes an ancient stage  
for you to act like a little sister  
could. Remember your eyes widening  
and your mouth dropping at her pirouettes,  
remember fumbling and stumbling as she showed you the steps.

## **The Skyscraper**

The skyscraper hates its history.

It remembers in its rebar and concrete  
the men who stayed late in the building  
of it, the wives that rocked near bastard  
children on their upper haunches, cooking  
for one, loving baby for two, a destiny  
the skyscraper hates. It's in the world  
like Santa Claus, recognizable and salient  
as those who made it gleam in city lights  
are nameless when we dream it a legend.

The skyscraper hates its fantasy  
emptying the elevator shafts and offices  
of real-life warmth, creating dusk-born ghosts  
of that which fills it in the day, morphing  
trivial office-talk into macabre howls  
spiraling up the crisscrossed framework  
until the skyscraper hates the night,  
remembering sun-scorched window panes  
as alive and the reflections of the passersby  
from that day as its time-woven mosaic, its civic,  
vivid totem pole, blind at night to its own resplendent cobalt visage:

as billions of stars, each a sun, all reflect to the top of its towering bright silhouette.

### **The Morning of the Marathon**

The little girl watches the window and the road  
and the baby while the man is out for a run.

The next week, the track is confettied with men  
like the injured soldier scene in *Gone with the Wind*.

The baby, while the man is out for a run,  
does this smile of gums that makes up her whole face.  
Like injured soldiers in *Gone with the Wind*  
the runners left families behind for the race.

Does this smile that's her whole face  
have the weight of man's battles?  
The runners left families for the race  
will define them—No baby's blankets, no bottles

have the weight of battles.

Things they tell people they did  
will define them—not bottles—  
it's how they succeed.

## **The Man I Was When I Was a Boy**

The man I was when I was a boy  
with my dad on the Banana River flats  
I could not club  
even a garbage fish

for being a garbage fish  
and not a red or a trout.

I could never understand why

we couldn't just throw it out,  
splash right out of the white bass boat, splash  
out into the water. Out. Instead, he had to die

because he might ruin some other fisherman's line.

But sometimes, if he didn't feel like dying that day,  
he hopped, he flipped and flopped, and he almost didn't get smashed.

I think these types are what we would call fighters  
if we were describing those children.

They are what we would call stubborn old goats.



Sometimes I say it is I in this fish's situation

and sometimes I say it is my heroes

and sometimes I say my God

You do have pity, don't You?

## Measuring

I reject my father's knowledge,  
and the way he measures wood,  
slicing a notch with a pencil  
across the entire board.

The way he measures wood  
is like a sailor thumbing out rope  
across the entire board  
covered deck of a ship.

Like a sailor thumbing out rope  
to tie down men on the water  
covered deck of a ship in a storm,  
he is positive he will succeed.

You can't tie down a man on the water,  
where he found freedom,  
or on the covered deck of a ship in a storm,  
where he found security.

He, too, learned security from

slicing a notch with a pencil.

He, too, learned freedom as

he rejected his father's knowledge.

## **Black Snake**

A staid black snake by my backdoor  
Coils up and hisses by the roof in the wall.  
I hope he never slithers from the cracks up there,  
But if I know that black snake he will.

Maybe he'll poison the base of the house.  
Or instead of striking my ankles, he'll head  
Up darkly inside and hide until I forget there  
Was a black snake sitting by my backdoor

Until he strikes, telling me how he'll take  
His time with me. I do know that black snake  
Out there. His fangs will poison the frame  
For slow years, my house still seeming the same.

The long snake sleeping, surrounding my door,  
Hissing and hiding in the base of cement, will  
Slink on the ceiling and slide in the floor—there  
Is always a sleeping black snake in the wall.

## **One of Our Old Special Bowls Has a Crack**

From too much microwaving, being  
Plastic and vintage, and dishwasher seeps

Through its lateral fracture like a sacrificed sheep's  
Spirit leaves its body, invisibly hovering  
Above the blood before it pools below its wooly back

After it is left and all the pomp and sacrament has ebbed;  
Its body lies like that special bowl that once made us excited  
To eat dinner, back when we made romantic vegetarian meals,

But now sits next to the mangled guts of red  
Peppers, the stiff stems of asparagus and peels  
Of onion, layers upon layers bound to be discarded.

## Unlike an Apple

You are unlike an apple, which is cold  
and pithy and dull when I take a bite.

Plus, apple meat isn't organ-red, but white  
and unforgiving, unlike your warm folds  
that are as resilient as palms that hold  
their form in a hurricane, firm but  
pliable, arching and moaning and tight  
until it ends, leaving even the seas lulled.

I know it's really dark, but apples break  
apart in mangled chunks when I chomp down  
on them, and it's the same way with you when  
I use my teeth on your charmingly lily-like  
heart: pieces of it fall off into my mouth  
and turn white and cold as I swallow them.

## **Empty Egg**

My lonely house is large and filled with furniture

I don't recognize, and only a sandy dream

version of a house that I just know as my home

in some nightmare, sleep-running in mud

as sheets vine through my legs.

I alone illuminate the dim

nursery, marriage bed and farthest walls. The house

misses the family that fills it, and I pity

that dreamer, that hollow egg that wants the filling

to seed and crack its silent shell.

## **Happily Married Teacher**

Canasta for two, the back porch alive with your late  
grandfather's Country CDs, voices we don't know  
the names of, we check on the baby through the window;  
we have cigarettes, tangerine martinis, and talk:  
(Will we buy a house? Will you become Catholic?  
Will summer seriously end soon?) The fearless  
Cockroaches that leave red bumps on feet, land on faces  
and in our ears, won't be so active when it does.  
Tomorrow we'll pour boric acid down cracks  
in the deck. Then the bugs can't wait for us  
to miss them when we look back.



### **A Sonnet for Your Rack**

I can't believe you don't resent your  
children for draining the milk from your breast  
when all the guys agreed you had the best  
rack in school—when you could simply lean over  
and offer a glimpse—that was real power—  
when you walked down the hall in your tightest  
t-shirt, you filled the fabric to its fullest:  
The wind filling the sails of the Mayflower.

So why wouldn't you—she advances towards  
her womanhood as you retreat from its  
full sail command over men. And your tits  
are the first things to go, the big cowards.

Why wouldn't you lament, as baby crawls  
up to your chest to empty out your sails.

### **Welcome Back KY**

The KY requested a transfer from the Romance  
Drawer to the bottom of baby's bassinet, gaining  
new employment

on a small rectal thermometer—in advance,

Baby's Mom and Dad ruled against  
such cruel and unusual measurement

like pacifiers and pink clothes—as the child  
is real, though, priorities trump naïve ideologies:

(like morals of vegans, stranded at sea  
with only each another as options to eat:

What changes is everything). But finally the KY  
Reapplied! under thick sex crashing like opposing  
moralities

slamming organic red battleaxes. Then, the KY slid  
back to the Romance Drawer, snug in a previously  
vacant void, among blindfolds, lotions and vibrating toys,  
ready and welcome and new,

like men and women as one becoming, as grownups, as girls and boys.

## Veins

In the violet shadows of the bedroom,  
we made love at the pace of veins  
of Shiraz leaking down inside

the curves of a wineglass, veins  
that gloss the glass in clear pink  
rivulets so slow that they don't reach the bottom of the glass

before you take another drink—  
And then again, fresh out of  
an hour's sleep, without a word  
to stir the shadows.

## **The Same Feeling**

I have the same feeling  
in my stomach  
when I sink in a plane  
as I do when I sink into my wife.

I have the same feeling  
in my chest  
when I am about to get on a plane  
as I do when my wife is late getting home  
and there is rain or dark outside.

I have the same feeling  
when an airplane drops from the sky  
and all the people inside of it die  
as I do when my wife talks a little too long to a man at a party  
and then touches his hand.

## **I Do Not Always Love You**

I might say I do not always like you

Proving me wrong, making me feel stupid,

But almost all the time I really do

Act like a child, get in my head, forget to

Do things I should, or things, if I was good,

I might. Say I don't—always, (just like you),

You remind me again, frustrated, true,

But with a mother's patience for a tired kid.

And almost all the time I really do

Remember how you passed by every pew,

six years of tears, strung like sequin thread,

and you would say, "I do." Not always like you

Can I be perfect, can I come through,

Can I do things that you, my hero, did.

But almost. All the time I really do

Accept that I'm the lesser of the two.

So since I'm always lagging by your stride,

I might say I do not always love you.

But all, yes all the time I really do.

## The Road

Some nights I hear a quiet road not far  
From my back porch, and I hear this constant  
White noise: some far away, smooth rubber  
Unceasingly glossing the night-moist cement,  
Or it could be the sound of one car shooting through the wind  
(I don't know which). But it hums like magic noise  
Machines that could make insomniacs sleep sound.  
There are dog barks, televisions, and cries  
From babies in the foreground, but behind  
All that, there is only that hum, to remind  
The road that he submits to much smaller  
Crowds than bright-light, rock-star interstates were built for.  
Either that or the road's fine with one machine  
humming like it's glad to be common.

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