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These poems are an attempt to say a few things about the feeling of loss that one experiences by being human. Whether in the form of disenchantment, disillusionment, disappointment, or death, loss is something that affects one deeply, sometimes strangely, often at some later strand in the timeweave we live.

Poems are offerings and appeasements proffered to time, and behind their variations, in this thesis, is the frivolously stoic idea that even though there is nothing to be done about age and loss, there are things we can hold dear, within a time, and again as memory, knowing that that which we now have will just as assuredly exit from us as that which we had. Belief, love, religion, we can hold only as long as they let us.

The thirty-one poems of Exits are divided, perhaps too much so, into three sections. The sense of loss is, for me, traced through the eyes of emotion rather than intellect, leaving intellect to order the poem ex post facto rather than the other way around, meaning that one feels the poem before one understands it.

If a poem, or Exits as a thesis, succeeds only as an experience somewhat shattered and partly memorable, acutely minute and private, I do not apologize for that.

EXITS

by

Joel Jackson

A Thesis Submitted to  
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Approved by

*Robert Watson*

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Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

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1848

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I

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1848

studebaker's dead

studebaker's dead and gone  
and gone are shiny, silvery hubcaps  
and days of careless rolling,  
throbbing, pounding, gulping  
days and nights of power

studebaker's dead  
and left a million naked children  
scattered in the junkyards  
to freeze like rusty  
orphans

a few still labor in iron sighs  
coming suicide-close to telephone poles

but junkyards talk in broken whispers  
of naked children  
in faraway places beyond the reach  
of metal abdomens

studebaker's dead



for stepin fetchit

3

boy!

you sitting up there

in the back seat of that long pink cadillac

with your name in neon lights on the fender.

people sure didn't treat you common.

the nights as shiny as anything

when you stepped out of the car,

lights glaring and blazing and bouncing.

you as black as ever

didn't matter

in that case when you got larger than them

inside in the dark, moving and talking

over their heads.

they shouted for you; not like an order, more a plea

and gangling bones and all

you'd oblige them with big white eyes and teeth in black face

until you couldn't help it anymore

and died

inside your own blackness talking over your own head

hearing echoes of nothing

they laugh at you still in old movies in old darkness

## frozen frog

the first few days of spring  
were as cold and damp as  
this dead frog

who stayed too long in his marsh  
and waiting for the spring  
found that it arrived  
not far beyond him.

now he is encased in ice  
sitting out a croakless vigil  
looking for every April

beside the thickened water  
of a reawakening bog,  
and the jail-keeper spring  
begins to melt translucent useless bonds.

and in a warm weather funeral  
i toss him back  
within the shadow of a home.

mrs. green's white rocking chair

has set for eighty years

5

silently

on the reef at the edge of the bay.

and every afternoon

in the blue-orange light of sunset

mrs. green herself swims slowly out to it,

drags her frail old body from the water,

and rocks out to sea.

but the tide always brings her back.

she rocks furiously,

knuckles wrapped tightly around

the sea-corroded arms of the white rocking chair,

her breath coming in short gasps from her old

steam engine body, taking in the salt air that

rusts her aging pistons.

varicose veins grow up her legs like blue seaweed,

and the waves batter her from crest to crest.

she has managed now for eighty years

to steer her creaking chair back onto the reef,

crashing like a wounded gull, screeching and flailing wildly.

today might have been the last time,

for she disappeared over the last horizon

more than an hour ago, her head bobbing eagerly,

having set sail for better reefs to crash upon,

and leaving us all without a tradition to watch,

carefully dying.

The Plastic Factory at Night

behind the green glass stained grease windows  
the whirring sound of grey gauntlets smear  
sight of someone's niece playing tennis next summer  
and in evening's shift of dark and intensity,  
clanking, clanking, across cyclone fence that  
tangles fingers sometimes into palms  
cursing, cursing, lamination  
and the air so matter of factly lying  
on everything besides yourself  
holding, holding, gates of castles, ranches, prisons.  
machinery loves the morning much as you love the night  
hating, hating, moonlight quiet across new turned cold steel  
roller bars and light that reaches somewhere.

Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Bulldozer

The front shovel is asleep in the dirt,  
I thought,  
then saw that it too had the yellow stiffness  
that attacks machines.  
It can hardly move in its jerky half-dead spasms,  
gobbling full-dead things.  
The movement of realms swallows it.  
The old passion, the mad wine of earth and rock  
has left;  
ineptitude and coldness stay.  
  
There is no justice for bulldozers;  
character is irrelevant,  
and nothing is sadder than the truly monstrous.



we saluted; i think we called it that,  
went through planned activities  
with no plan of our own;  
inspection, knot tying, merit badges.

then played capture the flag  
in the fragile night outside,  
never remembering, never forgetting.

nine o'clock came

in so many different ways,

and, reassembled, we stood through

may the lord be gracious unto you;

may the lord make his face to shine

upon you...

and someone's inevitable whisper,

and give you a piece.

again without a plan, without the need for one,

we walked in the warm dark air toward

incandescent drugstores

and told dirty jokes to laugh at,

not caring, caring most.

my poor old dog  
has forgotten how to bark, how to see,  
how to pray,  
and lives in a hundred mile dream,  
each day full of dog thoughts, sleepy  
waiting shortness  
that hangs like his chain link collar,  
a weight he dares not lose.  
but i see far back behind his eyes  
the wish for a rest home rest of life  
where cats are chased by someone else  
and sticks do not need retrieving.

nora chewed her chewing gum  
and read her newspaper.

and i watched that empty face  
from across the table,

thinking that she didn't think.

so i asked her for a pencil,

making a motion in the air,

to tell myself something.

but she shook her head

and now it doesn't matter so much.

cows, i believe, think.

something is lost in translation.

## portrait

an old woman  
sags over the lunch counter stool.  
her fat hands  
carry greasy food to her mouth.  
she chews  
with a desperate intensity,  
mashing fiercely  
a stale sandwich of wilted lettuce  
and limp bacon.  
she smears the grease on her cheeks  
with a paper napkin,  
pulls a bulging handbag  
from the floor,  
and rattling loudly, places all the money  
she has to her name,  
which is Mary,  
on the dirty counter.

the view from here

THE EARTH WEIGHS

as much as four hundred six billion  
average-size refrigerators,  
said the appliance salesman.

THE EARTH CONSISTS

of nine trillion seventy thousand  
dumptruck loads of dirt,  
said the building contractor.

OH WHERE

to set the iceboxes  
when they cart the world away?



ezra pound is still living in italy  
and i am still living here.  
there is no little difference,  
he is always himself,  
i am sometimes me.

lonely roses are not his,  
still, they are,  
in tiny corridors of crazy bone,  
silent movies slowed down.

no one really knows what happens  
to majestic lives of crashing histories,  
romance-ridden afternoons,

because life is a mutual toleration  
that sometimes bursts

into random days of joy and weeping.



could I recall

could I recall from the words of yesterday

could I recall you sent a postcard from Norway.

could I recall a delicate little boat

could I recall on the shore of a delicate little lake;

could I recall and I read quickly

could I recall in the sunlit afternoon

could I recall of a green and shady kitchen,

could I recall that you could hardly believe

could I recall how beautiful it all was.

could I recall your slowly closing eyes

could I recall

could I recall in drifting mist and rain and snow

could I recall

could I recall your postcard's soft and gentle words

could I recall I might see a child and wondering death

could I recall

could I recall.

words you spoke

could i recall from the waste of yesterday

would make a crucifix

for the rainy dawns of May.

and your looks of love so moist with dew and tears

would be the first and last

of fragrant useless journeys

into a secret past.

your flesh and warmth and sighs

would drown me in the golden depths

of your slowly closing eyes.

i would be lost

in drifting seas and skies and sands

could i recall

your passion's soft and gentle hands.

i might die a wild and screaming death

and never care at all,

could i recall.

During a Lecture by Gabriel Marcel

outside it was october, in there it was always

beside me sat a girl

who touched my arm and smiled

he talked                    the wrinkled man,  
bent over a divine manuscript apparently,  
his hair a huge gauze bandage floating about his head,  
the speaker's stand too large for him.

a motorcycle roared by with reverberations  
and the rainy windows moved in their casings



your hands are movement  
through my air.  
your palms are filled with blood  
that runs crying through your fingers  
like a thousand wilting roses,  
and from your eyes of tears  
that lie for me  
comes the only joy i feel.

## leaving

after the last music  
in a tiny white stuccoed church  
you asked if i believed in god.  
i answered vaguely, "no,"  
then saw your eyes turn a righteous  
  shade of blueness.  
we walked outside slowly in the sunlight  
but i don't believe you saw it.  
"then you don't believe in love either,"  
you said, not i,  
your voice like a requiem in the afternoon.  
along the street people walked away;  
sunlit final music  
from exit church bells fell  
through quiet and birdless air.

what did it matter if everyone had to die  
for you and i  
were the only greatness i could imagine  
within the body of yours and mine  
that waited for the sun  
to rise or fall  
so it would soon be day or night.

without me

it's so lonely without you  
whoever you may be now;  
i think that i could surely take  
just your being here, within  
the area of me.  
i cannot care for everyone  
and only wish that everyone were you.

i know that time has ravages  
that do not belong to me  
and my supposed mirrors are non-sequiturs,  
but people tell me things  
that other people tell me  
and i do not have to wish for loneliness;  
you have become whoever you are.

it was bright and autumn colored  
not so long ago  
with still green hill sides waving to us.

the sun was low and in our eyes,  
bouncing through the windshield of the car;  
you softened it with dark glasses.

it wasn't december then  
and no snow had fallen; pecan and tangerine  
were the shades of late thanksgiving.

you turned to me in brown and red.  
i listened but did not hear you as you talked.  
a wind was blowing

but the trees stood still,  
and i was lonely with you.



For Marty

"might not the beatific vision become a  
source of boredom in the long run?"

23

Samuel Beckett

somehow i will convince myself  
that all has not been futile.  
to think that you are here  
as well as i is the hard part,  
for you drift in on tattered wings  
like a lately raped angel  
and i am having a hell of a time  
finding even remnants of your virginity.

but somehow i will explain  
that you are not off in a ditch somewhere  
having children by the litter.

because of your anger i am taken aback  
but because you look stealthily  
for your beer can opener  
that is slung around your neck  
like a chromium crucifix,  
i notice that you are able to  
sometimes expound  
on death, and even life, etc.

what really matters is that you convince yourself,  
and in the process, me, that you will never be  
the gory christ you urgently hope you are.

rows and rows of angels  
stand beside your bed  
and laugh

at memory in the air  
that softly plays our breath  
like disappearing smoke

and nostalgia tells my hands  
that ideas of eternity  
will make no difference to me

prisons

of course i said it.

i love you.

with the shadows of venetian blinds

striping our shining skin,

the door closed judiciously with a "BUSY" sign

hung up to save embarrassment of your roommate.

i said it as alms given out of a kind of tenderness,

my last coins also.

but i said it to the brown radiators and the

crooked bookshelf

and to the Parthenon papered on the wall,

and to the pillow under your hips.

i said it.

you took it all between your legs

locked lovingly around me,

and i lost some of myself, all of you,

because of dying light and nowhere to go but away.

The people who had seen that  
 were with them a constant  
 in the "I-Don't-Know" world  
 and whispering, something always  
 still unexplained.

and last time, unexplained words  
 of negative state affairs  
 and being out of balance.

III

something, something  
 the person who had seen  
 of visible words in the  
 that in some way had the  
 out of the world.  
 words had a different  
 still as a word.

words had a different  
 of visible words in the  
 that in some way had the  
 out of the world.  
 words had a different  
 still as a word.

the fragile new dead virgin lies  
face down behind a concrete wall  
in the ill-begotten flashlight town  
and whimpering, wandering always dogs  
sniff outrageously about.

soft bent bones, unravelled clouds  
of repulsive dirty darkness  
and watery cold of drainpipe dreams  
huddle in regretting conference,  
remembering, remembering.

the forever free tenderness  
of virginal meanwhile virtue  
lives in seven realms beyond the door,  
east of the universe,  
where beauty's obsession is ravished  
with an ancient innocence.

here the shallow shattered pool  
of pillowed certain sleep  
has drained and moves with multiples of  
crawling happy ruthlessness  
and sixteen remaining virgins  
have hitch-hiked to the darling ocean's coast.



we live in dreams

28

my god and i

and go where only dreams can lead

and gentleness and warmth

are the only things we need

we talk in whispers

my god and i

in whispers loud and clear

and crowded rooms and voices

are the only things we fear

we soar without wings

my god and i

in cool and flaming gyres

and toss and turn in ecstasy

for peace and dark are our desires

we see forever endlessly

my god and i

in visions deep inside

whose cries of silent rapture

have nowhere else to hide

we live in dreams

my god and i

and live our life down dreamy ways

while all outside decays

crucifixions

through the wreckage and lovely trees  
 has shed the seeds of love and flowering flowers  
 with holy lasting sprouts a way  
 to brighter states and flowering things.

I

from no room

the empty gloom

catches

lost hyacinths

upon the floor

flowers

of a love

that cost

the footsteps of doom

left there

forever blooming

silently

beneath the evergreen and lovely trees  
has stood the wreath of long and flowing flowers  
with only lasting hymnal's cry  
to disguise divine and flaming wrong.

bright hands soon began to shrink  
and lovely grasp has shrunk  
to fiery heaven's long lighted flame;  
hands observe five-fingered helplessness

and feet together carry beneath  
the breathing length of torso bent  
burden's weariness unknowing strength  
unrecognized and withered, too soon spent for lies.

the velvet slow unmoving trees  
still now belong to growth that wreathes the earth's  
long awaiting birthday love,  
the tromp and stomp of sunday's foot.

the sewers of new york  
remain profound beyond innocence  
and we can trip the light fantastic  
in the empty souls of mens' bowels  
and live the gray life of intimate knowledge  
to the redundant ecstasies expected.

except for the amazing stink  
the sewers of love begin alike  
and dirty underwear airs itself  
behind sophisticated shelves of memory  
wailing with platonic orgasms.  
drowned in prophylactic unity are myriad,  
incomparable, galactic statesmen, cab drivers  
engineers, and pool sharks.

side street beliefs, gutter desires,  
blue gas-lighted flames  
in an hour's anonymous fame  
eat radiant, eager eternity  
with the latent fear of glutton's bewilderment.  
no one watches, no one imagines,  
no clocks expect, and only theories are explained.

now that the immense distances have closed  
and we are here in this box of a space  
let us ask the esteemed grandfather of the pack rats  
what conceptions he has for us.

come forth o' great brown vermin  
from your grimey corner  
and talk to us;  
do you believe in the psychic unity of man?

i believe in the psychic unity of pack rats

shall we believe then,  
with all our meager powers of comprehension,  
that you prefer to be surrounded by fat men  
who have little time to think?

you have hit the nail on the head noah old bastard

where then are we standing, or lying, as the case may be?

you have not ceased asking that since first you  
pushed your fragile hungry nose into my den and  
foraged out my cherished apple cores

but tell us we plead, of the spaces.  
can we assume that they have narrowed  
for the time being forever? o' giant  
among pack rats, had raven's war on the  
south wind not been successful, would we  
have free reign over what is called the distances?



you fool! you belated, ignoble, uncouth heathen;  
you smell of toothpaste and beer

33

forgive our stupid questions  
brilliant ferret of the garbage;  
your presence here astounds the senses  
and lends a moment of holiness  
to this stinking lair.

indeed it should! i, the most sanctified of all  
existing and non-existing pack rats, here among  
your automatic darkness! putrid condescension,  
ill-advised! there awaits within the grasp of this  
magnificent claw the vast expanses of infinity

oh my god

quiet critic! the lemmings' rush will be upon us!  
mad fool, pray to the top of your dungheap, but do  
not call so loud!

so said the grandfather of the pack rats,  
wise and royal scratcher,  
after the darkness and into the small immensity  
of the spaces close around us.

strange are the rocks  
and stranger still the blood that gushes there,  
a butcher's envy.

redness surges up to ocean's edge  
and i lie among wind-carved odd rocks  
dreaming of blood.

it is a place of dark waves  
and only antique courage smiles at them;  
there is no smiling back.

my old bravery  
is weeping in its heartache  
and can take no more

of blood-dreams i am making.  
crawling back through hard pink sand  
will take me from the sea.

for i smile only at tight strung arteries,  
dangling meat-flesh of my thighs,  
hard marrow of my brittle bones.

forehead crushes yellowed brows,  
laughing lips show jagged, aged teeth  
and lolling red tongue from red mouth.

## threnody for the living

i enjoy dying

wreathed upon the sidewalk,

halos across my insteps,

watching the skies become dark for me,

knowing it is myself

high in a pecan tree

watching cancers crawl among internal organs,

hearing Bach behind the leaves,

newly dead for church music.

glad and dying,

things i have done only once,

and glad of that.

intent and interested, afraid and dying,

halos made of Timex watches

shining in shadows more than i can make.