

INTERSTELLAR: THE SPACE BETWEEN

Jessica Foust

Creative Non-Fiction

When a star runs out of fuel, it dies and swells into a red sphere, expanding and engulfing everything within its solar system. After it sheds its outer layers, the only thing left behind is its core. This core, a white dwarf, may suffer two different fates; it can either fade and radiate all its energy away or it can steal matter from its companion star. When the white dwarf acquires too much matter from its companion, it explodes, creating a supernova. The supernova is so bright, so brilliant, and so striking, that, on occasion, it can be seen from Earth.

My dad went into retirement when I was born. He hung up his cigarette stained Les Paul guitar, cut his hair, and bought a house. But good ol' Rock n' Roll was far from dead: it scratched on a turntable, was danced to in the living room, and read like the bible. He adored me and his guitar Gods.

"They're geniuses," he would often say. "And you're my baby."

But Janis Joplin died of an accidental heroin overdose, Hendrix choked on his own vomit after taking too many barbiturates, and Keith Moon swallowed a handful of prescription pills that disabled his esophagus. I often wondered how a genius could do anything like that.

During long car rides that we often took to the Oregon Coast or the countryside, my dad would choose a CD and turn up the volume so loud we couldn't speak and tell me to just listen so I did. I learned most things about my dad this way. I learned most things about people in general this way. So I listened.

Naturally, I developed a similar love for electric guitars and men who could create music and words to match out of nothing. I spoke of them as if they were timeless philosophers or decedents of Shakespeare, the same way my dad did.

"Long live Jesse Lacey," I would think.

The poet of my generation. A master crafter of words. The frontman of my favorite band. In that order. If I ever questioned anything, he could find a solution as long as I just listened.

I was young the first time I fell in love. Completely certain I had met one of them: the men I thought had the answers to the universe. I carried my heart, now three times its original size, around with me. He assured me his had grown too, and together we became stronger as we lugged around our swollen organs. We were completely vulnerable carrying these pieces around exposed, but knew we couldn't live without them. Because, after all, your heart is as necessary as hydrogen is to stars.

Oh, and he played guitar and wrote his own songs. And me? I was his muse. His vessel into another time and place.

Humans and earth exist in the Milky Way galaxy, one of the millions of galaxies in the solar system. We co-exist among a large combination of stars, gas, dust, and dark matter bonded together by gravity. Galaxies can take the shape of grainy orbs or contorted particles swirled perfectly unperfected. They can be tentacle like or completely symmetrical. They can be both dazzling and frightening.

Zelda Sayre met a man named F. Scott Fitzgerald who could do similar things with words, as galaxies can do to onlookers. She eventually became Mrs. F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald said of Zelda, "I love her, and that's the beginning and end of everything." What he said of me could have been a bestseller, too.

The first time I went 24 hours without a meal I walked with a victory march. Emptiness gurgled inside my gut, boiling over, making my throat hot. I had fooled my friends and parents by assuring them I had already eaten and that I was not weak with the pangs of hunger. When I went 48 hours without so much as a bite I grew weaker still, but managed to keep going until my body failed.

When stars lose fuel, they explode. When people lose fuel, they collapse.

My very own lyrical genius had to pick me off the cold laminate flooring where I had slid after slumping against the wall.

Over a million living organisms exist on earth. Surviving, prevailing, enduring. NASA spends its funds searching the sky for life on other planets, sending our very own to explore. While nothing has turned up at this point, many still fear what truth they may uncover. The uncertainty of the unknown compels humans to be ignorantly blissful.

My poet and I would sit on old wood benches beneath pine trees with a beautiful acoustic guitar on his lap and words spilling from his mouth. I would hum along, soak in each line, and knew for certain that every word was for me. He assured me Jay Gatsby's gestures to win over

Daisy were juvenile compared to what he had in store for me. No wonder he sang for me as loud as he could in public places.

We sat in an empty field during an Oregon spring. The grass was soft and warm beneath our bare legs. We laughed and talked about future plans, which included his intentions to share his music across the country with me as his travel companion. He assured me that he would immortalize me in his songs.

Fitzgerald wrote, "I wish I had done everything on earth with you," but that was trivial compared to doing everything in the galaxy with him. We could live forever in places where time moves differently.

At one point he stopped and told me to shut my eyes. He helped me up and I blindly followed his lead as he sat me down again on a new patch of grass. He wrapped his arms around my waist and told me to open my eyes. I was suddenly staring at a view of the sunset I could not see before.

"I just wanted you to see something that took your breath away like you do mine," he said.

Eventually our bodies grew weary from wearing our hearts on our sleeves. It was nearly midnight and I waited for him to call with my face pressed against my mattress and my phone lying next to me. I fought sleep and ignored the agony forming in the pit of my stomach from going too many hours without a meal and too many days without hearing his voice. They tended to go hand in hand.

Finally, the phone rang. I clung to every sentence as I always do with boys who strum guitars and sing their own words.

"Why didn't you call earlier?" I asked.

He read, as if he had written in perfectly crafted stanzas, the pieces of me he could no longer endure. He described in detail how the sound of my voice was now not a part of his artistic vision and how the touch of my skin was no longer a force of nature.

The study of metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that considers existence. We know that various species populate our planet and that we are alive by all intensive purposes. These things can be measured, classified, and documented. But what happens during? What happens after? How did it start? What occurs in between? Aristotle warned young philosophers that first they must understand the natural world before attempting metaphysics, for it could not be so easily calculated and categorized.

We met for a ride in his muscle car. He enjoyed revving the engine and speeding down back roads. He said he just liked to see me smile.

We would turn up the radio and just listen together. When I slid into the front seat he handed me a folded piece of paper and once opened, I saw my name in his carefully crafted handwriting.

“Right over my heart,” he said, pointing to the spot on his chest where he wanted it etched into his skin.

He explained that sometimes he felt like Dante, journeying through the nine circles of Hell. Currently, he was in circle two, contemplating how to distinguish between love and lust for they felt an awful lot alike.

Want and need were also suddenly blurred. How unfortunate for me, because I depended on him like plants do sunlight.

Organisms each have their own life cycles. Sometimes the process is slow and sometimes it ends prematurely. Environmental conditions and surroundings affect this system as does genetic mutations. Humans’ life cycles are relatively simple: we start as a fertilized egg, and then fetus, then infant, then adult, and usually reproduce to continue the process. They, we, and us, consume, dominate, love, are born and then die. Our biological goals are simply to survive.

Animals have defense mechanisms that allow them to survive. Bees sting their enemies, sea cucumbers morph from solids to liquids in order to escape dangerous situations, and grizzly bears have incredible strength and agility.

Jesse said to that:

If it makes you less sad

I'll start talking again

You can tell me how vile,

I already know that I am.

Instead of fighting the jury like Socrates did in *The Apology*, I hated myself first, before he had the chance. When words failed him, I inspired more, as I’ve always done. I would raise my hands and let him fire away, already braced for impact. Our starship crashed and burned often.

Somehow, I managed to function by consuming coffee as if it was oxygen. It subdued the cravings for solid food and allowed me to stay awake.

When he decided I was no longer qualified to contemplate over, which happened like clockwork, I took charge. I knew that I didn’t deserve the comfort of such a basic human function. In fact, hunger was the one thing I could control. More importantly, it was something to mask the sharp slice of his words as they escaped his lips. The same lips that once compared me to otherworldly phenomena.

I can take a punch easier than I can take his rejection.

Jesse sang:

*It's cold as a tomb,
And dark in your room
When I sneak to your bed
To pour salt in your wounds.*

Once the pain of hunger no longer hurt enough, I resorted to drawing blood on my own skin. I wore long-sleeves everyday that spring.

Janis suddenly seemed to make a lot more sense.

My parents begged me to leave, but I couldn't bear the thought of saying farewell to my gatekeeper of words when my convictions relied on his lyrics and the notes from his guitar. They promised this was not the way and that in time I could move on. However, they were unaware that I, like Zelda, didn't want to live but rather, "want to love first, and live incidentally."

I was somehow the exception to biology. Surviving was a secondary objective.

Even Jesse said:

*Glad that you can forgive,
but only hoping as time goes,
you can forget.*

But how could I pretend that we had not floated through the ceiling and sailed through the galaxy together? We were extraterrestrials, condemned to a life of misconception and exile. Earthlings would never understand how his words existed for me and I existed for his words. How could I forget the conquering of planets as we fought for a place to call our own? We vanquished celestial creatures and dodged asteroids. And sometimes we stood in front of those asteroids, instead.

*A crown of gold
A heart that's harder than stone
And it hurts a whole lot
But it's missed when it's gone.*

We traveled at light speed, narrowly avoiding black holes that beckoned us forth no matter how appealing jumping into them would be. To feel darkness cover every inch of our skin and take us. But, everyday was not a grand adventure. Because even if the moon was really made out of cheese, I wouldn't have eaten it anyways.

Zelda died locked in a psychiatric hospital awaiting electric shock therapy. A fire broke out and engulfed her once full of life body, reducing

it to nothing but ashes.

I awoke, sitting straight up with my eyes open wide. Without hesitation, I dialed his phone number and put the receiver to my ear. I locked away the existence of us and sent it off to another dimension. I knew we could no longer collect from each other in the same place, so we endured in a parallel universe. We now lived, no longer as a binary, on the same earth. We continued to simply survive, as all organisms aim to do, pretending that we had not traveled through time and space together. I told him farewell before the supernova could destroy everything we had touched.

What people don't tell you about dying stars is that after they explode they can distribute debris throughout the universe. Many of the elements found on Earth are made from the core of stars. New life begins with death, and so on. But don't take it from poets when they say we are made of stardust. If you stop listening and start looking, you will see it for yourself.