



Explosions in the Sky

“Time Stops”

How Strange, Innocence

01/2000

Sad Loud America

On Discovering Explosions in the Sky During My Freshman Year of College

Stephen Briseño

If you're going the speed limit, the drive from Fort Worth to Huntsville will take you a tad over three hours. The day I moved down to Huntsville to attend Sam Houston State University, it took my parents close to seven.

My brother, Matthew, and I sang for nearly that whole three hours, my two suitcases sitting in the trunk. My Seagull acoustic guitar resting in its case in the backseat of my Pontiac. There was a sprinkling of conversation between us, about what my life would be like once school started, how things would change, how they already had. We mainly let the songs speak for us though, the two of us alternating DJ duties.

Mom and Dad, who were hauling my mattress, nightstand, and dresser in the bed of the Chevy, claimed they needed to stop for food. For gas. For a stretch. A gift for my roommate. A second stretch. The tarp needed adjusting after a brief rainshower. I think the silence between them might have been too much. Any lyrics they sang would've been a little overwhelming considering they were dropping off their eldest child at college.

See, I'm from a Hispanic family. My mom and two of her sisters live within a three block radius from each other. Her sisters and brothers still own my grandparents' house, even though they've been gone for almost ten years. That house has been the scene for all sorts of family parties, despite the fact that it has only a single bathroom. At this point, I am the only person on either side of the family whose address doesn't have "Fort Worth" in it. Mom and Dad weren't exactly thrilled when I showed them the acceptance letter. But there we were, six months later, standing in the parking lot of Cornerstone Apartments with my roommate, Simeon.

Home was the furthest thing from my mind. The northside of Fort Worth is probably like any other small town in America. It's a little corner of it where things seem narrow, confined, and yet you know that somewhere beyond Friday night football games and walking around the mall and dealing with teen drama, there is a much bigger world out there. Sure, I had traded one small town for another—that didn't matter. To me Huntsville was a new world to be explored.

I was uncharacteristically cold, distant, even with my brother and sister choking back tears as they hugged me goodbye. I said little besides "I love y'all," and "see you for Thanksgiving." I was starting fresh in a new city, ready for the possibilities life had to offer.

I credit Tyler for changing my life that first year at Sam Houston.

Tyler was one of my first new friends, a drummer with knobby dreadlocks, and overwhelmingly kind and enthusiastic. Back in those days, he drove a striped maroon GMC

Sierra minivan, always had a strange indie band playing through his stereo, and never stopped talking about music.

One evening, while hanging out at his rent house, Tyler had a CD playing in his boombox. I paid attention to the music, drawn in by the sound of the guitars. It had that big, distorted post-rock sound—one that I was increasingly drawn to with my growing interest in Mogwai and that strange Icelandic band who sang in a made-up language, Sigur Rós. Remember, I was from small town Texas and iTunes wasn't really a thing yet. Music discoveries pre-internet broke through like revelations through shows and word-of-mouth.

One thing that stood out about this CD that Tyler was playing was how, while I kept waiting for a singer to chime in with a verse, one never did. I thought it was just one of those one-off instrumental songs that some bands put in leading up to the next track. I usually enjoyed those. And for this song, I felt like singing would ruin it. It was pure. Any idea or emotion that could be expressed in lyrics would have paled compared to what the instruments captured.

I loved it.

"What is this? Who are we listening to?"

Tyler smirked. "Bro, it's this band from Austin. They are sick! Just instrumental all the way through."

Without asking, Tyler went to his computer, opened up Real Audio, and burned it onto a CD-R. From a cup on his desk he snagged a Sharpie, scribbled on it the following: "Explosions in the Sky—First Album." He placed it in a thin, bright translucent green jewel case, and handed it to me.

The album he gave me was Explosions in the Sky's debut album, appropriately titled *How Strange, Innocence*. And I promptly forgot about it. For weeks, it was smooshed amongst my other CDs, junk mail, class notebooks, and greasy Taco Bell wrappers in the front seat of my car. It eventually migrated to the back seat, where it must've fallen to the floor, and slid underneath the driver's seat, waiting like the ring Bilbo finds in Gollum's cave, for just the right moment.

Those first few months of school, my mom made it a habit of calling me every morning on her way to work while I walked to my classes in Academic Building 4. After a while, I screened her calls, let them go to voicemail. In between classes and studying and making new friends, I'd forget to call back. The 201 miles that separated me from my old life and old friends began to blur and I settled into life up until the holidays.

When Thanksgiving came, it was nice to see my family, my brother and sister, eat good food. There was one question that came up frequently from my *tias* and *tios*, most likely prompted from my mom: "When are you moving home?" The answer was always the same, "I don't know yet. I just started so it'll be at least a few years." I avoided vocalizing the truth: *I'm never moving back*.

My dad had a tradition of cleaning my car for me after he filled up my gas tank. Resting in the passenger seat among my other CDs was the green jewel case with Tyler's scribble.

My set routine on these three hour trips to and from Fort Worth usually began with something upbeat while I drove through the city, bleeding into something more

introspective once the cities gave way to the fields and open road of east Texas. I always ended up entertaining that strange, nagging feeling of *what-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life* that comes alive in your early twenties. That green jewel case eventually got the better of my curiosity, remembering the sound and feeling it invoked. Just outside Midlothian, Texas on 287, I took out Cursive's *The Ugly Organ* and popped in *How Strange, Innocence*.

The album opens with a repeating, droning static, giving way to a punctuated melody played on the bass. A counter melody follows, played high up on a jangly electric guitar. Their sound was rock as I knew it, but it was far more than that. The album ended and I hit repeat, starting from the top. After my second listen, I would repeat certain songs.

Some songs you remember because of a certain group of people, a particular event, someone you used to love. Others you remember because of how accurately it captures a truth. When the sixth track, "Time Stops," would start, I found myself hitting the back button over and over. What I immediately noticed is how the lead guitar is just slightly out of tune, but the song is all the stronger for it. For the next four minutes, a haunting, airy tune spreads out sans drums, happily going nowhere. But still there's this anticipation stewing. The band fades out at the 4:45 mark, and a final note lingers for about a second before a new driving melody abruptly takes over. It's a melody with somewhere to go and something to say, the antithesis of the four minutes that came before it.

Eventually, the drums come in like a riot unhinged, all directed at the snares and cymbals. I imagine drummer Chris Hrasky screaming at the top of his lungs while crashing out old demons. For the next three minutes, that new melody soars with both a deep acknowledgement and rejection of nostalgia. At almost ten minutes, the song fades to an end, never resolving. The riot just continues, but only softer. I've come to accept this song as a perfect metaphor for life, a soundtrack of unexplored landscapes.

When I pulled up to my apartment in Huntsville, I listened to "Time Stops" one final time with a fresh understanding of things, how life can exist with a calm regularity before a completely new melody invades. That melody can be abrupt, but welcomed, and nothing without that first half that came before it. At that moment I understood my parents a little better. If Mom and Dad had had *How Strange, Innocence* when they dropped me off, they probably would've listened to track six over and over too. It's only now, 16 years later, that I'm able to articulate that even just a little bit.

For the last 11 years, I've taught middle school English; the start of school is a regular part of my life. I've come to terms that I'm at the age where discovering new music seems like an obnoxious chore. I'm a resigned old man that only finds validity in the music he grew up listening to; some feelings can't be expressed any other way.

My only daughter started kindergarten recently, and that fact has painted all those fresh starts that school years offer with a different hue. The changing of seasons. A parent watching a child venture on their own down new hallways and classrooms and cities. That pain of letting go. The equal pain of embracing the sudden shift of a new melody. All of it hurts a little bit more. Before my daughter went to her seat, I knelt beside her, lingered for a little longer than I should have, whispered: "I love you and I'm so proud of you."

After dropping her off that first day, I opened up Spotify, pressed play on "Time Stops," closed my classroom door, and wept a little at what I've tried to say, but still can't fully capture.