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## Embouchure

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Embouchure

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Zachery Gardner  
University of Alabama  
Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, 2010

May 2014  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

This thesis is a representative sample of the poetry I have written in the last four years. It demonstrates a variety of formal techniques and procedures. Some recurring themes and preoccupations include mysticism, birding, and early blues music.

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[They were married in the]

They were married in the  
courthouse (her mother cried)

the old people tell the story how  
the old people tell the story

I think how it might have been

he says: there is nothing so beautiful  
as a stoned purple sunset  
over the marble mountains

he speaks little of it

that was long ago (he cried)  
it never has rained so hard again

she sits by the window  
he brushes back her hair  
(or was it the wind)

generations have gone by  
she is watching for clouds

but it never has rained, I'm told  
the sky is lonely and clear.

Hymn

*“Sage Maruts, may we be the drivers of the car of riches full of life...”*  
– Rig Veda 5.55:13

May we be the drivers of cars, cutting our portion from the sky, letting all sorrow pass us by as we traveling past water parks and shopping malls. May we be intrepid adventurers, chasing the horizon in our hardtops and hatchbacks, coupes and sedans, our gleaming convertibles and dust-caked minivans. May we be the drivers of cars without destination, exchanging vehicular favors, avoiding all ill roads, partaking of that brilliant gathering along the avenue. May we be in that number. Nourished by bottomless go-cups of coffee. The celebrants of a primal motorized sacrament. Urging always toward tomorrow.

Re:

Don't you know  
you were just  
a function to me,

though a pleasant one  
I haven't quite learned  
to replace.



[the last box still packed in the corner opposite]

the last box still packed in the corner opposite  
the dresser the last box left mostly untouched  
untouched first out of preoccupation then forgetfulness  
then laziness now left untouched almost out  
of principle some esoteric ritual of untouched  
the last representative of its kind the last  
representation of pure potential energy  
in the form of box with dented corner and duct-tape  
slowly unpeeling itself around the edges  
the contents the subject of much debate  
by the untouchers (whether supply creates  
demand whether observation affects results)  
they weigh the possibilities most likely not  
the open road not the moon or starfish  
or sweet potato pie most likely not California

Blues

I'm not singing the blues      sometimes it rains  
not singing the blues      sometimes it rains

fills with muddy water  
levees break

shake

a cold wet memory

don't sing a hymn for me      bend a knee  
for me      they say

angels sing the same  
damned song

for all  
eternity

## Embouchure

mind the vibrations

leave neither too small  
nor too large

a space

between reed  
and curved tip of the mouth-  
piece

draw lower lip lightly

over teeth push  
firmly against

top teeth and lip  
don't bite down  
tuck in corners of mouth

let no air escape

don't strain mind the vibrations  
strive for control

of mouth and tongue  
and delicacy  
of tone

## Little Song

a balladeer sleeps  
in the flowerbed

succored by sweet  
harmonies of honeybees

a dragonfly lands  
on his upper lip

suitcase stuffed  
with unclean spirits

belly full of night  
he fell in love

with a gizzard-  
blooded mama

there's just no making  
some things right

[We know spring]

We know spring,  
We know the smell of hair,  
Sunday visits, wreaths of ivy,  
We know the fence line well,

The torture of older cousins,  
Places not to hide.

We know the taste of salt,  
The stories all retold,  
We know every spoken word  
is an act of mediation.

We know winter and long blue eyes,  
The importance of measure and weight,  
We know each creaking board  
And how each portrait hangs,

Propane heat, stubble kisses,  
We know that hint of gin,

Where she used to sit,  
Places not to hide.

[We build lives to accommodate each other's madness.]

We build lives to accommodate each other's madness.

One drives to New Orleans at three in the morning to post bail.

One flies to Binghamton to provide reassurance.

None of this creates resentment.

Remember setting fire to the chifforobe.

Burning down an abandoned house in winter.

Other failed attempts to stay warm.

[I found your cigarette butt]

I found your cigarette butt  
in my car

from the night we killed  
that lonesome boy

my whole body  
squeezed shut

I put a hole in  
his soft belly

you gripped tight  
a bushel of hair

kissed his cold  
and sweating forehead

slit his throat from sea  
to oil-soaked sea

we turned him over  
the three-mile bridge

let his fishful gut  
empty into the bay

Thomas

Dumb ox hunched  
over massive manuscript  
diagramming divinity

So much straw  
to sweep away the refuse  
kindling to keep  
the work-weary warm



Collateral

easy as  
flicking  
yr joy

stick in  
cali  
forn-i-a

as seen  
on small  
screen

whose child  
ren these  
anyway

## Little Song

sweet butter-hearted mrs so-and-so  
relieve this whole worried dust-suckling world  
be mother lover sister and milkcow  
we fuck        you play ancient records of field  
crickets devouring entire crops of you love  
“be my ruby throated grosbeak tonight”  
we fight until the ghost gives up a cuss  
you take a shotgun to my appetite

say go to your ham-hock-minded boyscout  
all his chilled and malted adorations  
say run-on to your needy chickadees  
ain't nothing more important than your own  
creations        they sleep you creep your way back to  
the fat snake hidden in your chickencrib

Ave Maria

Hail Mary,  
full of grace,  
who brought god

into this world  
of piss and shit  
and blood.

This is your  
baptism. Lord  
be with you.

Blessed are you  
among women  
and greater than

all men. Mary,  
we cry out,  
ask mercy

for us poor  
mortals. We have  
mothers, too.

[The moon provokes]

The moon provokes  
the waves below.

We lean-out over  
the edge of the cliff,

pass around a mason jar  
of thin apricot wine.

From this height life  
can never wet our bare feet.

## Little Song

No more monkeying  
around this town.

Leaving today  
by rusty v8 billy goat

or buzzing mad  
Terraplane. Spilling mojo,

running Hot Springs,  
West Selma, East Monroe,

Vicksburg Tennessee.  
Googol-eyed land

of California, Ethiopia,  
China, the Phillippines.

No matter. I've got you  
right by my side.

Blues

All my dreams  
they start on trains

going opposite  
all others. End

in inverted  
conversations.

## Pilgrimage

No amount of digital sophistry  
can destripe, despeckle, balance, or posterize

the unblurrable reality of this  
sunless, overcast morning. Trekking through

a muddy brew of ground q-tips,  
tampon applicators and dental floss

with no thought of a better  
place to be. I squat and observe

egrets and bitterns bob clumsily  
through reeds beside the sewage lagoon.

Responding to domestic interrogations,  
I'll repeat familiar justifications:

To escape into the beauty of nature.

Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker

solid black back barred  
flanks white belly yellow  
crown lets off scolding  
rattle from sapwood cavity  
of burnt-out dead dying  
over-logged conifers near swamp



### Common Crow

stout stocky black bird  
familiar *caw-caw* heard everywhere  
woodlands farmland suburban roosts  
over half-a-million strong cunning  
wary sly consumes indiscriminately  
with destructive omnivorous delight

## Painted Bunting

daring high-pitched primary-colored *Pape*  
bright brilliant and wild  
clear compact fiery song  
delicate nest of fibrous  
roots and hairs feasts  
of ripe grapes figs

## Vermilion Flycatcher

little coal of fire  
brilliant scarlet nest of  
fibers feathers spider webbing  
creamy white eggs open  
river bottoms peet-peet peet-a-weet  
soft tinkling flight song

## Little Blue Heron

slate maroon immature white  
piebald croaks grunts squawks  
and screams stick nest  
small trees freshwater swamps  
coastal thickets plumeless lagoons  
plow to pick larvae

## Least Bittern

tiny blackish back buff  
wing patches soft coo-coo-coo  
secretive reluctant to fly  
cryptic color pattern climbs  
rapidly through reeds rise  
in rare rufous form

## Mockingbird

slender long-tailed gray bird  
alternating musical and grating  
repeated imitative rich song  
Nova Scotia West Indies  
city country desert farm  
warm spring moonlit nights

### Carolina Chickadee

black cap white cheeks  
double whistled see-dee song  
deciduous woodlands rotten stubs  
member of mixed flocks  
roams the winter woods  
familiar visitor to feeders

Lady

The lady in  
the blue silk  
dress

          lives  
in a room  
without doors

(told that is  
the only way  
to be free)

She spends  
her days  
counting marble  
beads

          learning  
to draw proper  
distinctions



## Proverb

Look straight ahead  
when spoken at by toothless  
fucker in army green cap  
swearing to sun  
at bus stop.

Theresa

The soul is satisfied now  
as trembling hands cling  
to hem of well-worn habit.

The seraph's spear penetrates  
the heart. Could it, this sweet  
excessive pain, be of the devil?  
My sin a lack of moderation?

But there is no moderation  
in you. The soul is satisfied now  
with nothing less than God.

Let me tell you what happened to me today

I was disciplined for non-fulfillment of post-match media obligations  
 I was not in the right state of mind  
 I was the one-millionth fleeing refugee of the week  
 I conspired to fix the municipal elections  
 I confessed to masterminding everything  
 I was smuggled into China via a kayak  
 I am a stooge  
 I implemented an enhanced pedestrian detection system  
 I rose 42.5 points, or 0.3%, to 14,338.7  
 I caused massive unemployment  
 I withdrew 4000 troops from West Africa  
 I suspended parliamentary elections out of respect for constitution, democracy  
 Thousands of mourners followed my coffin through the streets of the capitol  
 My funeral became a showcase of defiance  
 I was a symbol for everything I am not  
 I stretched out beside the sofa, waiting to have my belly scratched  
 I plead guilty to gross financial mismanagement of the annual extravaganza  
 I enthusiastically approved childhood euthanasia  
 I organized myself to strike for better working conditions  
 I was programmed to grade student essays  
 Freeing human instructors for more meaningful labor  
 I was reprogrammed to behave more like termites  
 I had my belly scratched  
 My extraordinary defeat evoked memories of boxing's golden age  
 It took me 1600 years to form and only 25 minutes to melt at the premiere of "Kinky Boots"  
 According to top psychiatrists  
 I collapsed, killing scores and injuring at least 54 others  
 As austerity-ridden nations sought to crack down on tax evasion  
 I was accused of taking bribes to include expansive images of battlefields  
 And war-ruined towns in a sixth season which promises to focus more on women  
 Don't hold my sheer likability against me  
 I was arrested in Zambia only minutes after appearing on live television  
 In what would later be discovered was part of an ongoing British probe  
 I was quietly released from high security Bagram detention centre  
 Sudden changes to my environment triggered rapid evolution  
 Of a self-deep-clean function to scrub crude particles from my depths  
 Scientists turned my brain into partially transparent jello  
 To better understand the intricacies of neural networks  
 I was found half-eaten by my cats in my FACEBOOK HOME®  
 I was promptly razed to make room for a MoMA parking expansion  
 I threw tens of thousands of euros from a speeding car during my getaway  
 I raised the child of my hostage as my own

The case against my opponents faltered  
I failed to be reconstructed

## Rush

Saddle up to any side game sit-and-go,  
shoot-out or slow grind. Texas, Omaha,  
draw or stud. Spy the raccoon, the flounder,  
the shill, the shark. Don't be a railbird. Go  
cow if you need to. 20-40 blinds,  
no limit, on the wire. Ace in the hole.  
Rolled-up trips. On a rush. Under the gun.  
Gutshot. Busted on the river. Short stacked.  
Nut low. Move in or muck. Watch that mechanic's  
grip. Now who's the donk. Slow play the downswing.  
Limp in. Calling Station. Hero call. Push.  
Steal the pot. Cripple the deck. On a roll.  
Deep stack. Heater. Call the clock. Maniac.  
High stakes. Wet board. Pure nuts. Dry ace. Flush draw.

All our old gods

are collecting dust in the corner,  
stacked unsteadily like yellowing scores  
of vaguely charming arcane compositions  
inherited from barely known great aunts.  
They have become home to spider webs  
and silverfish eggs. We step delicately  
around, avoid looking in their direction.  
Their musk floats through the entire room.

We consider throwing them out, abandoning  
them on the curb to be found by some eccentric  
curator of neglected shape-notes, but are stopped  
by a quiet inner nagging that we will one day  
be driven to perform these anachronistic tunes.

## Expulsion

You break down my door,  
free my only hostage,  
seal the room in yellow police tape,  
post two guards outside,

cast me out to wander  
the half-abandoned retail outlets  
of the mall. You make me to lie down  
in the doorways of bookstores

and coffee shops, to participate  
in bright white focus groups  
awash in the cold glow  
of overhead fluorescents.

I seek out the companionship  
of other hostageless individuals,  
binge on sugary confections,  
frighten passersby with my  
endless questioning.

## Somnambulist Shopping Spree

Drawn like a true believer  
to the flickering hum  
of convenience store lights.

OPEN ALL NIGHT.  
I glide in and out

of consciousness between aisles –  
blacking out by the sodas,  
waking near the magazine rack.

The register is guarded  
by an impatient alley cat.

I feel the heavy stare  
of closed-circuitry on my back.

The shelves are neatly  
stocked with pastel cans  
and boxes boldly labeled

FREEDOM  
JOY  
ONE FOR ALL.

I take a six-pack of PEACE,  
a carton of HOPE,  
leave my shoes for payment.

Exit through the woods just past  
the restrooms and ATM.



## Wasps

Each spring a dirt dauber molds  
 a line of mounds along the windowsill,  
 recycling the ruins of the previous year's dwelling,

and for the better part of summer  
 hums in circles guarding her home.  
 A few feet away a hornet constructs

a cluster of Carthusian cells over the door  
 to cloister her young.  
 These solitary predators have managed

such closeness year after year  
 with rare incident, though one season  
 the hornet flew too close to the dauber

and was torn apart by the larger creature,  
 but not before injecting its venom  
 in a final desperate thrust.

They both collapsed and were carried off  
 by plump iridescent beetles,  
 but within a week were replaced

by indistinguishable specimens.  
 Together they form an animate barrier  
 to repel more insidious pests:

salesmen, missionaries, neighbors  
 solicitous of favors or company.  
 The retiree on the first floor,

seeking an audience for his conspiratorial rants,  
 will climb half way up the stairs,  
 peek his head through the rails

then retreat when he spots the hornet.  
 The woman across the walk  
 who might otherwise disturb my seclusion

to beg a ride, won't enter  
 the orbit of the bloated black dauber.

Sometimes I stand pressed against the peep-hole  
eagerly awaiting her cautious approach.

Blues

white cars  
float down

the alabama  
filling the air

with the dead  
smell of fish

The Revolution is a Horrible Friend

The Revolution sits in the corner at parties, self-rolled cigarette in hand, silently judging your bourgeois mannerisms.

The Revolution likes to brag about all the places it's been.

The Revolution has many infamous acquaintances.

The Revolution never picks up a tab.

The Revolution will borrow your car without asking, take it to South America to get wasted, disappear for months at a time, and won't even fill up the tank.

The Revolution shows up at your doorstep uninvited, crashes on your couch indefinitely.

The Revolution does not believe in cellphones, money, or jobs.

When you least expect it, the Revolution will make some small gesture that will restore your faith in the Revolution.

The Revolution will tune your piano and restring your guitars.

The Revolution will help you hold-up a store.

The Revolution can be generous like that.

The Revolution will make life interesting for a time.

[Standing in a field]

Standing in a field  
of flailing human limbs,  
I grab the nearest one  
and yank it from the ground,  
unearthing a perfect  
replica of myself.

We work together,  
exhuming two more.  
Then four. Eight.  
Sixteen. Thirty-two.  
Harvesting an army.

Many of me will perish  
in the upcoming battles.  
Many more will succumb  
to the ravages of boredom.

I forget which of me is the original.  
Some even deny the doctrine  
of the protoplast  
as pseudo-religious nonsense.

I am not all created equal:  
Some of me have a talent  
for marshaling my resources  
Others prefer to focus on  
the task at hand. Some  
harbor a secret hard-on  
for hierarchy. Others are better  
able to accept ambiguity.