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Embouchure

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Embouchure

Embouchure

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

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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 untouching
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.