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Ham Radio Operator

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Ham Radio Operator

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

by

Zachary Hester
University of Kentucky
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2010

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Ham Radio Operator is a collection of poems.

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AMERICAN GHAZAL

Don't expect a refrain here, we only move forward, only update
what we care to keep: iOS, extended cab, Fat Boy, burritos as big as your head.

In remembrance of those we lost on 9/11 the hotel provides
complimentary coffee and mini muffins from 8:45 to 9:15.

Drunk clowns are popping up roadside in the high beams of passing cars.
The worst part, according to the paper: *This isn't just happening in Kentucky*

70-west stays shut down and my detour lifts a concerned eyebrow
of geese over the yellow of *Love's 24 Hour Dine-in/Drive thru*.

There is some good though: Florida Man reunites with cat lost 14 years prior.
In related news, Pennsylvania sheriff accuses Punxsutawney Phil of deception.

Here, trees lined with Huggies and Roman candles border the old pond
where, dressed as manimals in bull masks, we celebrate our independence.

I pencil each "A" with forefingers pinched plum-full of lightning
bugs, learning my name on sidewalks, in so much star-gut and light.

END TIMES

We say it where I'm from,
to mean: what's fucked up is by design,

God gives
signs, pay

attention to numerology.
Five hundred year hurricanes

so often now birds
have learned to thrive

by flying in the eye
of storms and in the face

of such low,
low Black Friday

rollback prices
like these, lord

it must be
a sign of the end of times.

Curses are breaking:
Geniuses are living

past 27: they have stickers on avocados
now that let you know when they're ripe.

It means the Cubs have won
the pennant.

We're running low on fuel
at the pump but thank God

a triceratops was here
and now my champagne

'96 Nissan Maxima has gasoline
for Taco Tuesday.

A total solar eclipse
is only visible from Earth.

There are fountains now that give you
every kind of soda. These are miracles.

Excess carbon emissions
will ruin a good sweet tea,

like too much sugar.
It means you can light

faucet taps of homes on fire
in the more magical parts of Kentucky.

PRISCILLA HUGGABLE ATOMIC MUSHROOM,
from **Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times***

The designers have invited us to embrace
our fears: to take home nuclear annihilation

and cuddle it. But I'm suspicious of growing
too fond of the inevitable order of this.

In front of the contained mushroom cloud,
my partner tells me the closest thing these days

to the taste of *real* banana
is Moon Pie—this included

the bunch of them I have cradled in the wire
basket above my microwave. She was talking

about the *Gros Michel* which is extinct,
or near it, or approaching it's hard to tell

but she stressed the old artificial flavorings
companies branded during the Cold War

were built to last. They were necessary
because no one was sure when we would surrender

the taste of something
we took for granted.

I believe if you scoot a thing an inch

for long enough continents can split.

That you fool memory
a millimeter at a time.

Don't we all, on our own terms,
learn to love what can destroy us?

I never knew until walking down Lakeshore
revolving doors were built to prevent draft,

never knew it was not the cold
coming, only the heat leaving.

CODA ATOP WELLS-FARGO,
OVER THE BRONZE MOUNTAIN LION IN BOULDER, CO.

She will be the last of the big cats.

Her open mouth, a copper reservoir,
quietly collects snow on a tongue
long-surrendered to lichen.

She guards the Wells-Fargo on Pearl Street
and if anything will live forever, it is a bank.

I had been sent away.

Not for good—just for this cup
of coffee which I take seated
across the street

from a sun that goes off this morning
like an electrical fire in a paper factory.

Light glides from my end
of the street to the lion's tail
as quick as the click
of a pedestrian sign, same as it will
until the final giant sun rises
and I know this is not sustainable.

Let me be clear: I believe in lichen.

They will be here, thriving
in the radiation.

I want to be there too,

to watch the last sun devour her,
or her devour it—
in the calculus of photosynthesis—
in the way only two lives
coming together can.

TAXIDERMY IN BOULDER, CO

“New Year’s night, just before midnight, a Boulder police officer rolled up to the intersection of 9th and Mapleton, pulled out a gun and shot an animal,” Fox 31 Denver

Because it is too hard to leave

a gun un-

shot and because buckshot

undoes

four chambers of an elk’s

stomach,

night dimly ties ribbons

of the star-

sky to the spaces made

undone

by aim.

This dumb shine betrays

the crabapple

leaves settled on the floor

of the still-

warm reticulum, like sod,

and police,

smiling, stand over the dead

with horns

cupped in each hand

for a photograph.

People say *light breaks* when

what they mean is

enters—as in, when flashed

the camera

didn't *break* the body, only
explored
the places left erased.

This is not the end. He will
clean the body.

Make right the head, the eyes,
for his wall.

The antlers will fight
for space

in a room filled with more
faces,

more eyes pointed toward
the same space,

in the middle of a living room,
in Boulder,

where things die and are made
to look

as if they never will.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY OPPENHEIMER

"It worked!"- Robert Oppenheimer, July 16, 1945

Have you never pointed a laser to the ground,
told your dog *Go!*, and become God? It works
ya know, physicists have set a watch to it.

Doomsday: I think they named it after the villain
who, in a marvelous panel of speech balloons,
finally overtook Superman— or maybe it was the other

way around, the clock came first. It's hard
to keep straight all the ways you can kill a hero
and all the reasons it becomes necessary

to make new ones. We have ventured out
past the slippery edges of science: reality
can be ordered *virtual*, just shy of one hundred

light years Babe Ruth strikes out in game 8
of the World Series—it's 1921 there—he is in
the on-deck circle of KDKP in Pittsburgh, PA.,

and in the hands of the right Ham Radio
Operator, you can still dial in the Lost Cosmonauts
and hear their countdown to reentry.

In 1890 Heinrich Hertz invented the radio
and from a satellite we know our galaxy
resembles an eye. Our supercluster: spiraling hair.

Why do we always confuse God
for something that creates?

I heard two friends at a bar recently

speaking intimately to one another:

*What's the difference between a playground
and a terrorist camp?* the one said.

Hell if I know,

I just operate the drones.

ON MARS ROVER *CURIOSITY* SINGING
HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ITSELF EVERY YEAR ON AUGUST FIFTH

The height of human achievement!
And loneliness.

A woman in this dance punk-electronica crowd
has come from nowhere,

shown herself, and tells me
how I dance says a lot about where I hold tension in my body.

She tucks her deep fried Grateful Dead inspired eggroll
in her mouth, flexes her fingers
along the knots in my back, and begins to move her hips
just a bit,

they were bubbles
in a carpenter's level.

She came from nowhere.

This is how it works,
right? We don't see a thing
until we have a name for it.

Most languages don't bother
to differentiate blue and green,

this only makes it easier
to confuse a horizon.

We manage to scrape brilliance together
at odd times though, don't we?

The giraffe's heart, two feet long, beats
twenty gallons of blood per minute
as if that is enough to sustain always sticking your neck out

and we keep sending music out
to space, *Curiosity* waiting for its annual curtain call,
performing donuts and infinity signs in the red clay
of that other world.

DREAMS ON THE MORNING
OF GETTING KICKED OUT

*"I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,
but just coming to the end of his triumph." J. Gilbert*

It opens like an eye-
lid in the back of my head

while I sleep. Satellites
stay in orbit by falling,

I need to know
that kind of math.

*Hell, you say,
love should make you feel holy.*

So I hold your voice
with child's hands

against my ears
like a bomb—

what a warm factory
the body is.

There is a magic in this,
but don't we dream of more?

These bodies could smuggle stars

from open fields like gun-runners,

stack light in beds
of trucks like lumber.

I love what stray long hairs
on a shoulder say about a man

or how even God blushes
at the open face of a tangerine.

WHAT I WOULD TELL YOU, DALLAS,
IF YOU WEREN'T A JACKASS AND DEAD.

.- / .. / .- / - / - / - / - / - / - /
. - # - / . - / . - / - / - / - /

*“Even the mountain falls down the mountain,
even in a vacuum, the moon erodes.”*
Dean Young

I

Outside the maple knits a leaf's shadow
off the spool of sunlight
into a six-hundred thread count
Molotov cocktail the size of my palm

and climbs the tiny ladder of staples on the telephone pole
behind it, toward the soft voices that ping off transponders

and I am thinking of that morning
when you said you don't eat sweets
the way alcoholics say they don't drink.

Consider the conversations exploding overhead, these hanging
lines a prayer box, the moon a quarter in the eye of a dead god.

II

City lights have wiped
whatever face the sky has out of existence,
and the pond—where the turtle
that rushed past our tent
makes its long journey
to the bottom—shuffles
between liquid and ice. Even in May,

Colorado freezes at this altitude
and the turtle buries itself
in the mud, neck-deep in oxygen,
its beak gripping the body
of water, its mind swiveling,
an open kiln coming to temperature.

The ancient eye watches the light,
staring toward a lens
that separates its world from ours.

III

The atmosphere, we know, was closer
to a brick oven during the last extinction.

We know it was sometime between June
and July, the lotus flowers and lilies pollinating.

We know this: glass fell like glitter
and the stratosphere
sifted rock back down to sand,

bullets the size of an Empire State Building
shot through a vacuum, tearing through a kerchief
of ozone like your grandfather's sneeze.

We know that's how it must have been
a stunning noise,
lilies quietly passing notes in amber.

IV

Two shells stand on my childhood armoire beside the signed baseballs and chewed-to-bits mouthpiece. These shells are bullets— and the red tracers of Knob Creek’s Machine Gun Shoot, where we would go every fall, are mine.

Kingdom: *Americana*, Phylum: *Ingenium*, Order: *Carnivora*,
Family: *Browning*. Family: *Remington*. Family: *Colt*.

Indigenous to the Greater United States, .50 calibers travel 2,800 fps. and the steel core and incendiary tips are hot enough to pull a school of mosquitoes out of a night’s sky like an insecticide.

Diet: scavenger. Diet: opportunist. Diet: cannibal.

Fact: it takes just under twenty minutes to chew through the dead cars that line the Knob Creek embankment in the photograph I have where my feet dangle, bobbing over my father’s shoulders, my tiny hands squeezing the invisible trigger to the barrel I stare down.

V

When you die the brain surges
one last time: the broken seal of a refrigerator door
unlatching before the electrical cord is yanked,
finally, from its plug and dollied
out of the empty kitchen:

a last flash of light before the move.
Doctors press their luck and name this

Near Death Experience. Even as kids we knew the tenderness
of that friend's open refrigerator, the light blinding
after the long walk down the hall in the middle of night.

VI

After the long walk down Sheltopee, after the evening
of frogs' songs and ruts of buck have worn balsam fir
down to kneeling prayers, after your knuckles have dried
to papier-mâché and creeks have split themselves
open in the caverns between fingers,

after the water has fallen long enough to cauliflower
everything it has touched into swollen bloom
and the open and empty beer cans have been crushed
into local color and after the stars
have finished, finally, boasting about their age,

the night drips off your still face and begins the slow crawl
toward a metallic gurney that hobbles over the deck's cracks,
where the sun, peeking up over the hedges
of your back yard, reflects off the chrome of the wheels.

VII

This morning: four horseflies
fossilized in the wax soap dish,
between the bathroom window's edge
and the tub's grime and standing water.
Being neither dim
nor too bright, only some Valkyrie-
touched nitwits, in need of nectar or blood
meal, the flies filled their guts and lungs
on the pollen of Dove, the lilac
of Dial, until their bodies were cleaned
of anything useful or living.

Dallas, the radiant halfwit
fly can beat its wings two hundred and twenty times a second,
but never once toward *no*.

VIII

This is not so different than your daughter,
now seven, and running the bases like you did,
fast and electrifying and rounding for home.

Never once toward home, those nights ran
through powerlines and privacy fences,
floodlights jumping
through our bodies like corked ground balls,
like air. How can no two things touch
and still move through a body?

A nucleus is small
compared to the holy spirit
of an atom, the same,
I've read, as if you've placed,
on the alter under the soaring dome
of St. Paul's Cathedral in London,
any common orange.

IX

A good ending should be surprising
and still feel inevitable and god damn
if you didn't deliver in spades,

just missing the look on your twin sister's face
when she found you stone-faced, breathless,

and I know you would have apologized
were it not for your collapsed lungs
buried in the chest cavity,
your face blued by the raindrops that fell
one by one, on the deck,

each drop speaking once when it touched you,
a single voice a sole syllable long.

X

You die twice: once when the heart stops
and again, the last time
someone says your name.

I can say anything here. Dallas,
our only moments now unspool
again in a space as black and vivid
as my own skull, where I still see
you bare-knuckle boxing
the garden gnomes planted
in your front yard.

Even the city you were named
for is how I know you

continue—shaking me
in a wind
the strength of your fist.

ON HEARING THERE'S AN ACTIVE SHOOTER
WHILE TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL IN TRUMANN, AR

Snow geese migrate in thousands,
 their white-breasted bodies rest
 in the rice paddies around us.

They are headed to Vermillion Parish,
 or Monclova, Mexico or maybe the Gulf,
where they will swim in the exotic scraps
 and the rich fatty trash of Coca-Cola, King Cake,
of candies and mole, tossed aside Powerball tickets.

But here, in Trumann, Arkansas
 everything is littered
 with the beautiful, filthy cotton
fields, the gins clicking
 like metronomes.

In the Pacific, two thousand
 of these birds dropped dead
 out of the sky from Cholera.

The only sincere double-billboard
 on the highway passes, *Rick's Sweetheart*
Special: Two sirloin steaks, \$19.99
 and the other sign underneath
We too are about to meet God.

And then, today, thirty miles west,
 In Jonesboro, the other light show—

a Gadsen Flag wrapped around a 12-gauge throat,
demanding we hear his voice
over the dipping sun that turns
the white of the paddy geese gold.

OCTOBER IS AS FINE AND DANGEROUS A SEASON IN AMERICA
After Thomas Merton

This morning's fog is ghoulish and a procession
of austere goats eat the heart
of the park across the street from my apartment.

It's a work-trade with some farm
just out of the city. I say *howdy* to the man running
the operation, his body molded

in the sinking lawn chair that holds
his body as he drinks
his thermos like a man who believes in coffee.

I hear waterthrush,
their throats warbling from the ribs
of a pink kite buried

in the unearthed roots of a tree
hanging out
over the edges of Scull Creek.

A squirrel darts.
Overcoming her own body,
she carries the whole of an apple

back to wherever she banks.
Her stomach remembering last winter
the way mud remembers

the sole of a boot.

The moon is a Maglite
fooled into hunting snipe

and houses line rows of the city-
grid like a train
run off-track—all tremble

and steam, tremble
and steam. The chimney stacks
have set to flight what,

for a little warmth,
our lives set on fire.

CHILDREN'S ARCHITECTURE

If you don't believe a rock can be a key,
trust how it opens his skull:

The home was a lab that year
and still smelled of toluene,
clean bathrooms, and cats. Still

violent. This was not our subdivision.
It was the opposite. And the kids
from different schools had little

patience for our clean clothes.
I know there is luck involved
in this. We measured guts by split-

seconds spent on the dare that Dallas stay
hung from the carbonized rafters
that stained hands. These beams

long dry-rotted and the rib-
cage of this house laid bare
to a beating light so long,
ferns and dandelion
had potted in the exposed sewer pipes.

With our arms up, clinging,
the boys picked parts of their broken
street apart, hurled them, and made a soft room
out of his left cheek,

unhinging the door
by the temple I pressed my palm to.

SO MUCH OF ME IS HOT AIR

that when the empty space
 between the atoms in my body

is sifted, finally away
 what remains

will fit
 inside a cup holder.

Maybe it's apocryphal to believe
 the heart is only ever medical

but what else is left
 when the war drum
 finally stops its march.

As a kid I learned metaphor,
too, could be a punishment—

 it's not the taste
 of soap that bothers me so
much, but how after thirty seconds

 the cleaning agent begins
to peel back the layers
 of your mouth, like a red head's

sunburn, or the first
 hurried bite of pizza from the oven.

When I was six
I took a pair of scissors to the tulips
 in my mother's garden,
tied them in a bouquet,
 and handed them to her
because I thought the only way
 to show someone you cared
 was by severing roots

and drowning something
 in glass

 on a kitchen windowsill.

ELEGY FOR THE CHILD WHO DID NOT DIE OF SIDS
or One Sentence in Memory of Shane Lass (1992-1992)

I am terrified of the moment
no one witnesses—not

trees falling among the forest
leaves but more like the glaciers

floating along the nitrogen
seas of Pluto—the terror

when something as large
as Iowa swims

about a planet as quietly
and unnoticed as a star turning out

in the sky above the backyard
you nearly grew up in

in 1992 when your mother held you
close as a grocery bag,

like a head of lettuce and tossed you
in the ditch along the road home.

HOW TO PLAY WAR

When my father was five he stole Virginia

Slims and butts of Pall Malls off Aunt Barbara
and his own father. He hunkered down

in the crop-maze bunkers of the house

across the street, scurried in the husks
and became nothing more than a smoking rattle

in the corn tassel. Armed with a .22

and a soldier's uniform, my father lit
the neighbor's field to ash. Call it tinder.

Call it napalm. My grandfather came home to fire

fighters lining his street and amputating the lost wing
of his neighbor's yard with jigsaws of water.

You can measure battle

by scorched earth. Isn't this our measure
of war? Winter's ration burned up, a season's haul

lost to friendly fire. Call it casualty

of profit. This is a Christmas story here,
or one where we're sitting around drunk

off the myth that what we do as children matters.

MUSCLE CARS

Earth too has an appetite for beasts.
Smooth, Bridgehampton Blue and Oxblood wings—
bewitched of bent chrome, not meant for flight—
are just heavy ornaments and so at home
when nudged from the nest,
landing on a tongue of limestone.

 This is not enough
of a warning. *Advantageous*
is naturally occurring pain relievers
in the brain and a strong line of credit.
It's knowing the cave will always be
55 degrees. Turn pit to profit. Put glass over it.
Rope it off. Charge admission
and let the kids under twelve in for free.

ELEGY ON GREEN SCREEN

The trick to touching fire
is to stand in front of the TV

and wait for the 8 o'clock news.
Stare inches from the static,

wonder why green is the color
that captures Super Bowl confetti,

bullets, Marvel body suits,
and El Niño. In post-production

they call this Chroma keying—
the way CGI-effect

removes background
from the subject, the way

tonight, heat frames Carbide
Industries, where chemicals

erupted this morning on WLKY,
the flames taking up the familiar

left hand bulletin on the screen,
my eyes so close they squint in the light—

where I can just make out the factory
my father works in golden time.

A POINTED CONVERSATION BETWEEN A CARDINAL
AND ITS REFLECTION SOMETIME IN WINTER

As a kid I watched a cardinal, real tough guy,
a solitary blur of bird like canned cranberry
flecked against the white chinet of January, dodder
from finger to finger along a Chinaberry tree, drunk
off the fruit, slicking his crest up into its pompadour
with his quick-draw comb as all the bars are closing.

He was beautiful but losing
his edge and I watched him dive
straight into his own reflection

on the pond's unforgiving stage plate.

I knew someone
who did this.

It took a little under a year
to watch her chew her own teeth,
to grind molar into terracotta soldiers

at attention before her tongue. Another year
for her body to become hermetically sealed,
her mind a sweetbread.

There is nonsense in hearing the bird-chatter
of a thing when it breaks its own self in two.

ELEGY ON MARTIN COUNTY COAL MINE
or A FEW QUICK WORDS FOR MASSEY ENERGY

The trick to turning water to fire
is to light the taps in homes
of Martin County, Kentucky.
There kids color rivers
orange during school to map
lake-fires they know
bubble up in seams
between floorboards.
If you were a child
we could roll a boulder loose
through the back
of your home,
rattle your crib, choke
your watershed with slurry.
If you were trees we could stain
high water marks in coal against your bark,
but all of this you have already done
for us. You are in Flint now, in Congress,
you are the phantom and we are the dead
canary floating in the mine.

TO THE BIRD THAT FIXES ITS BOWER WITH THE SCARLET-HEARTED PILLOW
or A LOVE SONG FOR THE UNITED STATES:

“We’re accustomed to looking at the history of people by day”-
Svetlana Alievich, *Second Hand-Time*

Tell yourself it’s beautiful.
 Believe in courtship.

Even humans drag trash to the nest,
litter with something that shimmers
 and hope for the best possible case of love.

 I saw you on
Planet Earth the other night,
 between the unwrapping
 of Singles—

American
is gold too, and if you close your eyes
 it can turn into something exotic,
like *Velveeta*.

 Dear, I would wait
to see if they make
your crown unfurl— what happens at night
between two people vanishes from history—
 I would wait to see
before
 you peck your soft heart
 into the ground,
 before you offer
one more shiny thing.

notes

AMERICAN GHAZAL

Varying slightly from a traditional ghazal, I wanted to (purposefully) appropriate a form from Arabic poetry. Historically, the form consists of a series of couplets with disparate narratives, each ending with the same final word. The last couplet is set off by the author incorporating his own name into the poem.

The content of each couplet stems from either newspaper headlines or the author's own personal experience.

END TIMES

The “more magical parts of Kentucky” refers to Martin County, where 306,000,000 gallons of coal slurry spilled from Massey Energy. The arsenic and mercury killed everything immediately in the county's watershed. For this, U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao—wife of Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky)—fined Massey Energy \$5,600. As of 2018 the tap water of Martin County is still highly flammable.

PRISCILLA HUGGABLE ATOMIC MUSHROOM,

from **Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times***

This is based off an art exhibit by Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby, and Michael Anastassiades, 2004. Currently on display in the Art Institute of Chicago. It is made from reflective fabric and polyester stuffing. The first two lines of the poem were lifted from the artist's statement.

ON HEARING THERE'S AN ACTIVE SHOOTER WHILE TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL IN TRUMANN, AR

On December 10th, 2015 a man at Arkansas State University drove onto campus with a shotgun, a can of gasoline, and a large propane tank. He held the shotgun to his chin and poured the gasoline on his truck. The campus and surrounding schools were placed on lockdown for the remainder of the day. There were no casualties.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY OPPENHEIMER

The Lost Cosmonauts refers to several audio recordings discovered by amateur radio enthusiasts in Italy. The recordings are of a woman describing her reentry into the atmosphere and then an apparent crash. The former Soviet Union and current Russian government have denied these tapes existence.

MUSCLE CARS

“Two years ago, on February 12, 2014, a sinkhole had opened up inside the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and eight Corvettes were laying at the bottom of it... once we saw more and more visitors starting to trickle in from the interstate, we shifted our attitude. We embraced the situation,” Corvette Museum

ELEGY ON GREEN SCREEN

Golden time is the term for hourly pay over 60 hours in one week, when the employee is paid double on the hour.

TO THE BIRD THAT FIXES ITS BOWER WITH THE SCARLET-HEARTED PILLOW

or A LOVE SONG FOR THE UNITED STATES:

Ideally, this can be read three ways: LTR, following the left margin down, following the right margin down.

“What happens at night between two people vanishes from history” is an excerpt from Svetlana Alievich’s *Second-hand Time*.