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In the Temple of Off-Ramps

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IN THE TEMPLE OF OFF-RAMPS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Chapter	
1 Blue Collar Scholar	1
Yeats Infection	2
Traditions of the Blood	4
From Penshurst	5
Southern Belle Jar	6
Delta Gamma Something	7
Thacker, eh?	8
Mass Grave of the Muses	10
2 Where the Skunk Cabbage Grows	11
Moby Thresher	12
Sod House	14
Big House on the Prairie	16
To Stumble Blue	18
Elegy for My Father	20
Curse of the Blue Hairs	22
Lullaby for the Dead	24
3 The Inner City Sage	25
A Life More Ordinary	26
At the Liquid Grocery	28
The Fearless Symmetry of McGarbage	29
The Grate Sleeper of Yonge Street	30
Junkie Drawn and French-Quartered	31
The Truant Martyrs of Charles Bridge	32
Aurora Metropolis	34
Where the Fuck is Hogarth Now?	36
4 For God and Country	38
Celestial City of Cholesterol	39
Mullets for Christ	40
The Arms of Old Sparky	41
Ralph Lauren Polio	44
The Towering Workhouse	45
Getting Bombed	46

5 Paradise Lust	48
The Sweaty Bellies of My Parents	49
Strangers Have the Best Candy	51
Chanson de Lonely Crotch	53
Tennyson Gets Crabs	55
Scrambled Porn	57
Mall Diva	59
Fuck Hope	60
So Malignant Together	62
Tonight I Spend With You	64
Nocturn	65
To Hibernate in You	67
Vita	68

Abstract

Any creative thesis of poetry is an attempt to distill one's aesthetic sensibilities into a single masterwork. This particular venture is not unique in that respect. What separates this lyrical endeavour from more flaccid mainstream poetry, however, is its visionary temper, for this is a poetics of revolt for truly revolting times. This poetics of subversion embodies a reactionary aesthetic that traverses both the beauty and the horror of our world, and as the poems expose social injustice, they venture sporadically into the sublime delicacy of disgust.

“In the Temple of Off-Ramps” is ultimately a search for meaning in the sterile world of popular culture – a rummage for social justice and human rights in a disinterested and apathetic globalized world – a quest for grace in a domestic sphere where dysfunctionality reigns supremely impassionate.

Chapter 1

Blue Collar Scholar

I grow, I prosper;

Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) *King Lear*

Yeats Infection

Unsound by every syllable,
drivel siphons from these barking lungs,
choking verse out of necessity

In pristine imitation
I spit meter from pleurisy –
each word crippling

as the borrowed and the bland
balladry of the fevered muse drowning
among the reeds of infection.

No Gunne or weapon
salve have I, just poetic
babble on melancholy bent,

only language to
give the lie
of unaccounted things.

This is my design.

This is my disease.

Traditions of the Blood

Through genetic ropes
of common strands
hereditary poison ripples
in this palace of veins

where a stranger
tint of rude
claret trickles
through capillaries vulgar,

just unwashed plasma
and the dregs of wisdom and
alcoholism – slow venom,

like cheap wine peeling
wallpaper,

like red gravy staining
human furniture maculate
crimson.

From Penshurst

Beneath a doulton sky,
to the manor bored

I'd wandered lonely as a tourist
with Astrophel and a can of Stella.

Chateaued on your dirty great grounds

I drizzled on the parade
of double-barreled names long departed,
stumbling below stairs
as you stood on ceremony.

And roped off from this ancient pile of class,

I shamble past the pale living daylights

of Penshurst

where the looking glass of gothic double-glazing

unshapes a life
measured out in lager cans.

Southern Belle Jar

Betrayal was the impulse
for your passing
love.

Maybe
clutching you in this velvet
trap might rid
me of my demons.

From buried knuckles
and the stalk that broke
the privy seal,
I came
unglued and left
my hymen on the library steps –
weeping your love
like a sorority pledge.

Delta Gamma Something

In the white-washed boot camp
of free masonry,
morning bleeds hard
through a Rebel flag curtain,
its Promethian red
rousing Flunkenstein from his stony sleep.

Ankle-deep in porn and pizza boxes,
the acned Greek staggers
God-like down a hall of Budweiser wallpaper
for toilet and acetaminophen –
the breakfast of freshmen.

Into a bowl of unflushed piss
he admires his image,
swallows his poison
and returns to the feathery womb
to be born again.

Thacker, eh?

- reflections on the plaster cast of Thackeray's dead hand

Stalled digits

of fair vanity

– silenced

by a cast system

of sorts.

Handsome clutch –

the hushed grip

that once rocked continents,

ensconsed

till the cows come home.

And though I can't put my

unworthy finger on it –

no ivories shall it tickle

no parchment will it scribe

no nose will it –

picturesque.

The grand duke knuckled under
in quiet reflection –
a tarnished
lily white reminder
to makepeace
with your
moneymaker.

Mass Grave of the Muses

Empty of image,
I am dog-weary at your grave
For the warm wine of genius
Has long evaporated.

No longer surrendering sweet variations,
The nursemaids of art –
Just memory's toys,
Their flashing wings of thought,
Their eyelids thin unblinking
Play traffic with the stars.

Shut under the darkening green
The sacred nine
Answer dust
Under a tangled spray of plagiarism.

Chapter 2

Where the Skunk Cabbage Grows

Canadians do not like heroes, and so they do not have any.

George Woodcock (1913-1995) *Canada and the Canadians*

Moby Thresher

Abandoned where she
stumbled in the deluge of
 drought –
the remains of a rusty contraption
 too weak to paddle
against the grain,
 had run aground on
the unkindest tide of all –
 the dust bowl of '37.

 Washed up
on ancient prairie shoreline
 in a makeshift next
of fencing wire and dried spit –
 beached by evolution
and no spare parts –
her tempered hull
 bronzed in corrosion,
 rots on the breakwater of stubble,
scarred by bushels of

wheat long-digested
in her belly of dust,
sweat
and a crop of lost fingers.

Defiant, the galvanized
hull buckles in
decline, its sunburned sinews
crippled under the soot
of forgotten days,
just a scattered carcass of
spent machinery
foundering beneath
the dusty waves.

Sod House

Two whoops and a holler
 up the road of
bald-ass prairie,
in the home of the brave
 but at the rough end of a
one-trough town,

 two lavender cowboys
– sunk in the saddle
 of reverie –
set up camp
 under the cursing
imp of suspicion.

See,
there weren't no
closets in the sod
 house on queer street,
just rawhide windows and
salmonberry curtains.

And behind those dirt walls,
lied the fruit of deception,
the crimson sins of elder bachelors
whitewashed –
hard-proved hands
with housemaid's
knuckles never
brought into the fold.

Big House on the Prairie

Where great plains stumble
and the big sky falls,
a napalm
sunset pours
on the rattling cage
of a plucked canary
walking the line.

On bald-ass
foothills
a wild rose waivers in the
winds of change,
some flowery quisling of
hapless pedigree
whose slender reputation
blossoms under the chain
link of the
adjustment centre,
his stale memory
refreshed

in the flinch of

this joint

as a truncheon

falls upon the battered weed

reformed.

To Stumble Blue

Unable to silence the father
 you silenced yourself
and took the rope
 at eleven.

And now I watch
 you dangle
in the eyes of the big
sister who cut you
 down,

the one who calls
to mind the vacant
 sockets of
your lavender cheeks,
 your dormant frame,
mishandled and hostile,

 your hairless arms,
where lilac tokens betray

a daddy's affection –
that bruised your spirit
and stilled the dignity
of this vengeance.

When I gaze into
her grey eyes
I look upon
a burdened child
who stumbled blue
out of troubled times –
as I
watch his bitter
colors turn
indigo
indigo and gone.

Elegy for My Father

Beneath a façade of skin
thoughts and words evaporated through
truant speech and
a quickened pulse that's been stilled.

Under unblinking eyes
the deceptive calm of a chin dangles
in relief, as hands
gripleless and worn
offer frail solace
from the crucible that numbs
us both.

Discarded to an apologetic doctor
and sorrow's nurse,
derelict I am, for
tonight,
my father came unbuckled from the living.

His stalled flesh has
reached its modest limits,
and like a withered vine,
I'm left to gather the escaping warmth.

Curse of the Blue Hairs

In the rains of autumn I set my mother
 adrift on a sea of blue hairs,
on an ocean of senility
 where she must tread mortality,
 navigate the ruddy tide of time
amidst graying deities half-naked and pinched together in
 the music of restraint.

A villain by necessity,
 I pushed her down
 prunefaced corridors
through the unproductive vineyard of the aged
 through mortal debris where memories are wrinkled
 with the turning of the years,
through a landscape of loose skin with
 pulses parallel to the machinery of death.

My task to discard her and the chafe of obligation
 among those seasoned in frail dotage,
 among the silver dew of flesh ripe

with dangling years.

My duty to tuck her into the last cradle,

part her veiling hair

and watch her swallow the foul medicine.

Lullaby for the Dead

For every
shovelful of earth
there are as many shudders

when the private scar
gouged
in the government of dirt
summons
darkness and
gravity pulls
with vengeance
into the rot of time,
washed over with the stubborn
mud of the living.

Chapter 3

The Inner City Sage

*The fathers and daughters are lined up by the coffins
by the Statue of Bigotry.*

Lou Reed (1942-) "Hold On" *New York*

A Life More Ordinary

By the steep palace of the strangers

I watch seasons pass

in the valley of the obvious.

where time hangs heavy

with compassion

fatigue and indifference,

where food banks of ignorance

nurse a generation of misfits who've

mastered caution at a young age,

a hateful progeny allergic to

passion and play, who

just say no to most everything

like ascetics without a cause

like brownshirts of tradition

bankrupt of doubt, their shopworn

eyes weary from designer stigmata and
the unfolding of the scroll,
their cabled lenses scratched

with legends of reruns and retards
as they plod through thin times
regretless in their little asylum.

At the Liquid Grocery

Where madness is sold by the bottle
vodka-blind silhouettes rage at their image
from the wrong side of the glass.

Shut out of the happy shop,
two copies of former selves
seek second-hand ruin for their moveable feast.

In exile together,
they drink from the self- same river,
suck upon their pain and seek the weapon salve

among a battalion of dead soldiers
and strangers who shepherd their
curses with change.

The Fearless Symmetry of McGarbage

In the forest of paisley and plastic,
a matrix of debris
washes up on the tide of convenience –
a harmony of corporate flora, super-sized and
long-digested in forgotten bellies,
scattered like half-done broidery
sewn by traffic and hunger.

Like spent shell casings,
the bleached bones of McGarbage lie abandoned
among torn diapers and shopping carts
where the turnpike's wake blossoms
on the styrofoam green.

The Grate Sleeper of Yonge Street

At the mouth of the urban geyser
gasps a riot of

tepid smells

surging from Yonge Street's
cough of sick buildings.

The inner city inferno bestows fleece
for cold indifference,

invisible alms

for those unfriended on the wind,

those tangled on the fringe

of an unwalled world.

And knitted to a grate that

blossoms fingers,

on the upbursting warmth

a drifter clings to his blustery cradle

so the down of winter

no longer dusts his

dreamless night.

Junkie Drawn and French-Quartered

Like a derailed streetcar

named demand

the misinformative years

of an unhappy youth

that lost its marbles

and came unglued with airplane cement

then jagged window pane –

must now chase the dragon,

the force of habit

hopelessly devoted to the

united colors of benzedrine.

The Truant Martyrs of Charles Bridge

At the death of day

overcast effigies scoured in time

dryhump fog above the sluggish Vltava.

Through the dirty weather of night

cherubs glide briefly 'round Gothic towers,

their granite wings minding gravity

and cobblestoned anarchy.

The unsainted watch the hallowed dance

– St. Joseph and Francis pirouette

past St. Ann and Cyril who quadrille

cheek by jowl.

St. Christopher asks for change,

St. Vitus does the thorazine shuffle

as John the Baptist passes water in front

of the Pieta.

Jerusalem Slim and the walking wounded
go postal in the light of the parish lantern
– the gilded Christ glinting like an aldis lamp,
breaking the rough news
to good St. Wenceslas and the
stone dogs of God stumbling
among the shadowy prey.

Hard busts fettered in dark repair
blackened with the grime of guilt and guano
– martyrs all –
set loose into the sooty night.

Aurora Metropolis

Tonight

a halogen umbrella

stains the sky

and cold clouds dangle

unripened

by the purple haze

of aurora metropolis.

A sunless night

resists inclement darkness

made incendiary,

as the glint and glimmer

of subtopia

slouches below

malignant and weeping –

marmalised

in a jerrican of optimism.

Somewhere flickering in the safe distance

the white highlands majestic

and isolate –
unbalanced on livid rock,
a melancholy herd
slumbers in the happy rut they've dug –
but spent candles
burnt at both ends
just wax ineloquently.

Tonight

in a blaze of glory

I hear

the torch song of the borough

awaken the mutual load of moans

where unsoothing noises

sing in the hard

hard rain.

Where the Fuck is Hogarth Now?

From the rising damp of
Cardboard City
rough sleepers of the night
waken from hunting sleep.

Yoked together
in a patchwork of
severed selves – unknit
fragments of virgins and veterans,
the unwaged and unwanted –
the financially embarrassed –

Denizens of the pasteboard palace
like fleshy debris
blown vagrant on a gusting
melody of traffic and insect song that

sweeps the asphalt's
mane of garbage 'gainst
a fretted wall of boxboard and

tangled curls of blankets –
the kingdom of wet
drapery perfumed with living –
hemmed with the furniture of friends.

Chapter 4

For God and Country

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) *Life of Samuel Johnson*

Celestial City of Cholesterol

Along the paradise of signs
the gospel of belly Gods decrees
franchise litanies.

Like sacred beacons torn from clouds –
tinted shadows of neon
hang evangelical in a loud tangle of

trademarks above the communion
of well-upholstered masses who in sacramental banquet
share the corporate spoils.

In the temple of off-ramps
the rhythm of grease and folding green
spill hallowed into the collection plate.

Mullets for Christ

From the martyred expressions
and the haunt of holy feet
a dark tide of words –
resounds in the garden of damnation

a saintly mess of soldiers,
mullet messiahs,
screaming scripture,
their pious manes sweating obedience
to the hairnet of religion.

In wifebeaters and pickups
they came to this
Golgotha of redemption –

to be reborn,
to be righteous,
to be annoying.

The Arms of Old Sparky

Along a chain gang of events
from the hood to the hole
from bitch to blanket parties,
our homeboy ran out of stays
the night the blindfolded lady
demanded dark deliverance,
the popular rage of pine box parole.

In the back row,
the glory roader offers three
tears and a bucket,
a melody of neck-verse
cloaked in halleluiahs and puritan venom,
a cry for madder music that battles
crude harmonies sugared with the rage
of sirens next-in-line for the electric cure.

With the widowed door behind him,
inch by reeking inch he does
the duck-walk to the chamber

where the rough magic of Edison lies in wait
with the small army of vengeance intent
to wallow in the music of his ruin.

Under raw fluorescents,
he sheds his iron jewelry.
Shaved head and humid eyes glisten
as the body stumbles into the arms of
Old Sparky, its leather limbs and tin halo
clutching hard for the bumpy
ride from the big house.

With an official nod
the first draught of Florida
juice is thrown back,
the head bobbles
puppet-like under dark cloth
where purple eyes clench.

Braised knuckles bite hardwood,
and marionette feet dance
as the mouth blooms a symphony of hurt
to a body static.

With a second nod the palsy returns,
hot flesh shudders fragrant,
charcoal fingers flutter
heels tap and piss trickles to a puddle as
a final spurt of claret blots the burial shirt –

the translation of flesh through smoke and
molten calm.

Ralph Lauren Polio

Thinly amoured for glamour,
the darlings of design
hobble to the danse
macabre of vogue –

a coterie of mosquito-limbed
shadows hurling fashion down
runways and in Cannes,

in crippling finery and in continents,
in nothing
but the newest wrinkles from
the architects of fashion –

creature comforts
for the hollow-cheeked and emaciated
draped in the indelible labels of excess.

The Towering Workhouse

At the happy workhouse
it was business as usual.

Between draughts of coffee,
market-born speculators
were Merrill Lynch Arthur
Anderson, pushing Enron
and promises, blue
chips and commodities.

And then,
from out of the grey,
the widow and orphan stock
exploded in the holy
mathematics of exchange.

Rough trade in the
stranglehold of September.

Getting Bombed

Our drinks went flying
through a hail of fake tits and toupees

when the chick with the killer bod
finally went ballistic.

In the wake of noise,
women wore hearts on their sleeves –
hard drinkers were bent out of shape –
even the regulars abandoned their posts

to pirouette to the strange music.
And when the dancing stopped,

I was wearing a table and
you were legless at the bar.

Just sprawled on the furniture of strangers,
with red gravy in my hair,

a slick taste in my mouth

and a hand on my lap that wasn't mine.

Chapter 5

Paradise Lust

How alike are the groans of love to those of the dying.

Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957) *Under the Volcano*

The Sweaty Bellies of My Parents

Under an asbestos moon
the sweaty bellies of my parents
slap to the sound of
a running toilet.

With glands knotted,
they let dinner
burn for tonight it's the
rutting season.

How the sheets sing, how
her ginger eyebrows
bulge as I run the
gauntlet to gestate
mistakenly like some
maculate conception –

A dry run
thrust into being,
thrust into the
shape of their desires –

A foul copy of themselves.

Strangers Have the Best Candy

Like a tiny

 junkie held hostage

to flavour

 I fell

pawn to the emperor

of lollipops

in his clown clothes

 and bag of sweetmeats

 sugared with rage

 guaranteed to seduce my palate,

 to extinguish the hell

of a sweet tooth.

So with nicotine digits

 he led me to his playground

for some hide and suck

'cause if I'd swallow
his pride he said,
the bon bons were mine.

Chanson de Lonely Crotch

For every unattended

groin

a symphony

of sad instruments await

the gathering hands

of the maestro.

In the playhouse solitary

organs rehearse the ache to peal

sounds of

riot –

the siren din

of guy cramps

or

the sacred fugue of tender

loin under

knit hands.

Play on

sweet opus of the second

coming

play on.

Tennyson Gets Crabs

From the forgotten shores of uncharted seas,
on the monsoon wings of a feathered dory,
my shipmate raised blue peter to stem the tide –
to hush the whispering bilge
on that shameless ocean of existence.

Yet between windswept sails and the mast inclined,
an unwelcomed traveler tarries beneath the waves –
an unanchored itch drifting rudderless on
the tangled maze of our knotted course.

In the blood-stirring shadow of a maritime cancer,
two passing souls with unbattened hatches
shiver below deck as the pinching ballast of
that menacing intruder swells the tingling
ranks of arabesque patchwork.

And from this briny mane to your golden fleece,
in the vermin threads of many strands –
these down hulls felt the tug of temptation,

the cryptic rash of rude parts –
a serpentine fury to split hairs –
trampled under a belly crunching spasm of compunction.

And wrapped in this drizzling mist,
staggering and sea-legged –
abandoned ship we did,
plunging into the undulating drink –
the bounding swell of this whiskered requiem.

Scrambled Porn

Within this smog of desire,
we swim upon a symphony of
garbled groans –
the salty music of the spheres
and a sweat that leads to nothing.

On the verge of grasping
static silhouettes
hum-colored and animate,
we ponder their parts –

Shapeless limbs,
invisible fabrics
empty of image –
perverted by the rough magic
of technology.

Such strange theatre cast
for the solitary vice of
the uncabled masses

naked in thought –
clothed in reverie.

Mall Diva

In this mall some
bubblegum chanteuse chants a
spray of organized noise –
an underage melody saccharine and frantic
'bout stutterin' hearts and doin'
the nasty.

With trumped pipes and teats –
pierce navel vestal and hairless –
our jailbait primadonna beckons
the stare of navel gazers –

Hungry shoppers compelled to
check out the chicklet
icon of she-bop crawling up
the charts and posters of
pubescent boys who'll
have a blue-veined
Christmas without her.

Fuck Hope

Loathing hardboils silent
beneath cold shoulders

uncoupling desire
every time
duty calls,

every time
the demand to press
flesh summons

love's thespian
to play the possum.

Indifferent to redneck
foreplay and the Viagra cutlass
like an ulcer
in my flesh,

I'd rather stare
at plaster than face
the wincing scent of
 halitosis exquisitely
 lovesick and ruttish.

From the truant
 ache of congress,
this much I understood –

– when
you fake orgasm

you fuck
 hope.

So Malignant Together

In these bastard
arms I clutch
you like a chore –
 you beauty
now foreign as
my cravings.

On this make-
 shift bed I
warm you like cold
porridge
as we come the innocent,
deadened
 by the touch
 of truant
affection and rancor
 by the truckful.

Just imperfect
 strangers hip-weaved

at wrong angles

and vacillating

so

malignant together.

Tonight I Spend With You

Tonight

in the burn

of August,

I bend

my glance

to your raising form,

to your uncovered breast

to the pleasing

pain of you,

raw-boned and slender

– darkness thin

unblushing –

you,

naked to the skies.

Nocturn

In a flood of black
these hands read
you like Braille –
dark and precise
– undaunted.

But ten fingers are too few
for understanding
the grammar of
want where
touch staggers

and temptation
tugs unyielding
in this mist of bad words
– a tender tune
beneath enormous night
laid bare –

our breathing cramped

in dark riot

as you dangle

damp at

the linen edge

of congress.

To Hibernate in You

On the blueback fringes of winter

I found you goosebumped

Under a blanket of indifference and

The old snows of the past.

In the color of cold

You buried December.

Januaried,

I winter over you.

Vita

Former editor of the *New Delta Review*, Nat Hardy begins his new position as visiting assistant professor in the Department of English at Oklahoma State University where he will teach literature and creative writing and join the editorial staff at the *Cimarron Review*. His creative and scholarly work has appeared in journals in the U.S. and Canada.