

WHITESIDE, JAMES ROBERT, M.F.A. *Saudade*. (2014)  
Directed by Professor David R. Roderick. 49 pp.

The title of this thesis comes from the Portuguese term, “saudade.” Saudade is more than our English idea of melancholy—it can be thought of as “the love that remains” in an absence. For the purposes of the project, the poems in *Saudade* explore the relationship between memory, music, and perspective in relationships taking place in a contemporary urban pastoral. Specifically, the poems address relationships—usually romantic—between men. As a gay man, I feel it is especially important to write from my own experiences as a member of such a community. The work in conversation with contemporary poets such as Frank Bidart, Richard Siken, Craig Arnold, and Kathleen Graber, reaching back even to C.P. Cavafy.

The poems’ speakers are faced with one of life’s most confounding desires—to know for certain the thoughts and feelings of the beloved. How is shared meaning communicated by two people who are socialized not to speak about their emotions? The poems search for perspective, a safe place where they might access the individual experience or viewpoint of the other. The tension between intense feeling and a lack of ability to communicate with the object of that feeling is central to the poems in *Saudade*. Some of the work (exemplified by the poem “Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 in D Major”) has begun to transcend the “you-I” binary in order to explore the possibilities of the speaker sharing elements of the internal life with a general audience. This work explores the public-private tension so germane to contemporary discourse.

SAUDADE

by

James Robert Whiteside

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2014

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by JAMES ROBERT WHITESIDE has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Centos .....	1
I. LETTERS FOR T .....	2
Spring Hike, Mt. Cammerer .....	3
Letter for T .....	4
The City .....	5
Vacation .....	6
Morning Song .....	7
Letter for T .....	8
Marked .....	9
remember .....	10
My Cousin, Dressing in Drag .....	11
Saudade .....	12
One wants, the other wants .....	13
Self-Portrait as Paperwhite .....	14
Letter for T .....	15
Saudade .....	16
Fishers .....	17
consider .....	19
Scenes .....	20
Letter for T .....	23
II. THE MUSICIAN .....	24
Transverse of Venus .....	25
Holding On .....	26
Iris .....	27
consider .....	28
Scenes .....	29
Philosophy .....	31
Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D Major .....	32
Expansion .....	37
Letter for the Musician .....	38
remember .....	40
No Note .....	41
It's not .....	42
Symphony of Psalms .....	43
consider .....	46

Failed Love Poem .....	47
Little Fugue .....	48
Morning Song .....	49

## Cento

The boy walked away  
with a flock of cranes following him  
like Sonny Liston  
with an open fist.

I wanted  
to reflect the sun; I kept praying. Dolls  
exist, dreamers and dolls;  
killers exist, and doves, and doves.

I look at my body under the spell  
of gravity:  
a split fig, filled with dew, and  
if I could live again  
as just one thing, it would be  
the forgotten trap he set—the mock blood,  
this begging, a decade of stones  
inside me still.

I.

LETTERS FOR T

## Spring Hike, Mt. Cammerer

The perfect day  
to hike this trail—shades of winter  
pulling back, spring shining through all the gray.  
The trees, except for pins on firs, still bare  
so we can see through  
the poplars' bare bones to the Blue Ridge  
which seems to rise around us when we turn  
a corner on the trail.  
I don't know about  
your profound fear of snakes until  
you barely miss one with your boot, and  
you make me go back  
to find its brown form, the singular scaled  
muscle hiding in the leaves. After that,  
I walk in front. At the overlook, I snap a few  
exposures on my old film camera,  
one of you, and you flinch. I say, *I'm not  
trying to steal your soul. I just want  
to walk quietly next to you.* We reach the peak, old fire  
tower still standing after all  
the decades of wear. The marker  
tells us the elevation, how far  
we've climbed since parking the car. Beside it  
a trillium blossoms in the rock,  
and we take its presence as a welcome.



## **Letter for T**

You've heard this story before, how I went to the greenhouse, and all the plants had died, the cacti and succulents yellowed, the large forsythia turned brittle. In my reflection I saw you standing next to me, saying *Seek out the abandoned city. There is inner peace.* The low moon Cheshired in the sky. The glass rippled like a wave, your voice rang in the dark, a singular crisp note.

## The City

Whenever I am back in his city, I stop  
for coffee at the place where we met.  
Seated at the table, I put my hand  
where his hand was. It was so loud  
that night—we leaned in close  
just to hear each other's names.  
Our cups of bright coffee—the sign promised  
notes of crisp apple & clove. I stay  
for so long the people around me  
cycle away & are replaced. I watch  
the baristas finish their shifts,  
hang their aprons in the row  
of hooks on the back wall.  
Back on the sidewalk,  
every red car becomes his red car,  
every pair of glasses is in front of his  
eyes—practically blind, one brown flake  
floating in his blue iris.

The city is always rebuilding itself.  
It repurposes the shells of the things  
we already know—with such ease  
it will turn a factory into a  
condominium, make space  
for restaurant after restaurant.  
It finds new ways to make all those lives  
work at once—the old man  
who played the accordion on Sunday  
mornings, the woman next door  
calling loudly to her dogs from her porch,  
flicking her cigarette into the yard.  
The city always builds the new bridges  
next to the old bridges, knows  
that even the tallest buildings must  
be built to sway in the wind.  
It refills our cups with confidence, knowing  
the liquid will burn our tongues.

## **Vacation**

T has me buried neck-deep  
in the sand while I was sleeping.

When I wake, I see him standing  
in the ocean, longing for the high tide's

undertow to pull him out to sea.  
I pray to the moon to stop

the tide, but there is nothing left  
to save. Gullsounds and gullfeathers

form a false cloud around me.  
Kept at a distance,

I watch his body disappearing  
beneath the foaming crests.

## **Morning Song**

I wake up first, the eastern  
curtains letting in  
a light golding  
every one of the room's suspended  
particles. His eyes  
are balls of night  
behind closed eyelids.  
I lean in—his breath  
still whiskied.  
Outside, the hive I've been watching  
the colony build—the bees  
swirl, a thorned wind.

## **Letter for T**

The room has a nice view  
of the alley out back.  
Thin curtains let in  
the glow of streetlights  
& gear grind  
of early morning  
trash collection.

Like the tulip  
you tempt me  
with your brightly-colored  
upturned skirt.

Two & three times  
I climb on top  
and our sounds  
fill every corner.

## Marked

One man has the outline of a heart  
inked above his left nipple.

On another, a bird so lifelike  
it seems the creature is, midflight,  
surprised to find itself  
limed to a young man's arm.

On a third, some of Whitman's lines  
following the curve of his hipbone,  
and a windblown oak leaving on his shoulder.

And then, my whole body bare  
for them to see. Each asks  
how I've made it this long without  
marking my body, *Why no tattoos?*  
My response comes with plans  
for future designs: two lines  
from a song I love, my home  
state's border on my chest,  
a sleepwalking boy, finding his way  
around the barrel of my ribcage.

---

Do you remember what it was like to feel  
human, to whisper into  
another's ear, wrapped in each  
other, shielded from winter's cold  
by your mutual radiance. What  
did you say. Do you remember a baying,  
a calling skyward.

---

## **My Cousin, Dressing in Drag**

He posts the pictures online,  
drunk and all dolled up, sitting in a Denny's

somewhere in our family's home state,  
somewhere in Missouri.

Silver hoop earrings hanging beneath  
so much hair he's still figuring out how to style,

tulip-red lipstick and too much makeup not quite  
concealing the scar from his cleft palate surgery.

In another, he's a rakish smile  
in black patent pumps, and he actually pulls off

a bolero jacket with his fake rubber breasts.  
At Thanksgiving, we step outside for a smoke.

Pigment transfers from his lips to the paper—  
a fire at both ends of his cigarette.

He says that today he is not thankful for casserole  
and gravy, but for Prada, for stacked heel boots.

Though I don't ask, he says he feels  
more beautiful every day.

When we return inside, I sense the orb  
of quiet that follows him around the house.

It's enviable, the way he ignores  
their sideways glances, abides my silence.

Two weeks later, another picture: his new tattoo  
is a chest piece with swirling script:

*Only God Can Judge Me*



## **Saudade**

Night's urgency—

to feed, to breed, to howl  
                    endlessly, to find another

who could momentarily sate.  
                    This is when I learned the hand's

power, placed in the small of a back,  
                    to do what's done in darkness.

## **One wants, the other wants**

*after Mark Jarman*

One wants to uncork the bottle, the other wants to go for a drive. One wants to peer into the windows of strangers, the other wants to discuss the world around them. One wants to sleep, the other wants to shop for pottery. One signs for the package, one digs for treasure in the yard. One says maybe this is a mistake. One walks out of the apartment.

One rages at attraction. One rages at the telephone's persistent silence. And there one is, in a slim, blonde waiter, riding his bicycle to work. There in the farmhand, hanging tobacco leaves in the barn. There in the men playing cards late into night, their wives in bed sleeping with their lovers.

One plays chess, bundled up, in the park, one unearths a cup, a skull, a diadem. One plays with his food at the table, one goes hiking and never returns.

One worries he is losing his grip on reality, that the ghostlike figure he held in his hand has vanished. One that his mind is like the many salmon swimming upstream, changing their gills to breathe new water, jaws hooking in anticipation of finding home.

## **Self-Portrait as Paperwhite**

On the sill, a dish

of pebbles & water,

a single bulb cradled

in their rough embrace.

Stem & petal piercing skyward,

rods of clouded glass, knotted

roots clinging to their rocky

substitute for earth.

## Letter for T

Years now since our parting, and I remember trying  
to piece together the scene: bathtub, maybe,  
the safety razor I can see so clearly in your cabinet,  
the room spinning into a mixture of all the world's colors  
at once, your arms heavy with their draining.

Did some picture appear in your mind—horses running  
across a stream, their bodies strong, hooves violent  
on the water's surface? Only to wake again, the brown spider  
above your head weaving the ceiling's corner closed.

Last week, when you called, this all came back to me—  
the weight of your thin body on my back, the grit  
of your cheek rubbing my nose raw—

the gentle certainty with which, a country spanning  
between us, you said *I wrote a poem about you.*

And now, I open your file on my screen, read your note  
that it's a Tranströmer imitation, and in your lines a match  
ignited by nothing more than the force of the wind—it's beautiful.

So I dig out the shirt you lent me for work one day but  
I never returned, the one with the buttons made from real  
abalone shell. I put it on, wearing the beauty of your form once again.

## **Saudade**

He was young and loose-

hipped. Broad shouldered, his body  
like a wave, and mine, the shore.

Above all else, he wanted to be  
wanted—there was so much

of him to have, and (What can I  
say?) I was hungry.

## Fishers

—*Burgess Falls State Park*

River spray clouded the valley I'd slipped down  
the muddy sides of, its cool mist  
renewing on a warm spring morning.

Another man had beaten me  
there, baseball cap askew and dirty  
t-shirt tucked into his pants,

black wellingtons guarding his feet  
from the wet, armed with a net,  
a pole, and a bucket, fishing for

I didn't even know what, fish  
for catching other fish perhaps—  
I didn't think that anything worth

eating would live in such choppy  
waters, when, as smooth as a surprise,  
he resurrected a catfish, longer

than his forearm, from the water.  
Its fight was a lesson in strength,  
leathery skin shining like a diver's

wetsuit, violently flapping in the air  
like a flag on the beach, into the net,  
and then into the bucket.

A great blue heron alighted  
on the shore across from me,  
and I watched as it studied

the shallows of the bank, slower  
waters a haven for smaller fish,  
and pick them from the water,

one by one, into its long narrow beak.  
Each of the fish, no longer than  
a finger, behaved exactly the same:

struggling, waving violently,  
and the bird shook it until  
the minnow would still,

perhaps identifying its last  
bit of sunlight before  
making its way southward,

still alive, still moving, maybe swimming down  
the dark hallway, maybe seeing some  
light at the end of the heron's throat.

---

Consider your walk  
to work, how it had rained overnight,  
how you were certain that you felt the collapse  
of a snail's tiny helix beneath your heel,  
how you could not bear to look down.

---



## Scenes

1.

The boy leaves you alone in the hotel.

    He closes the door,  
and by the time it latches, he can hear  
    you crying. You're already feeling  
    sick. This is the version of the story  
where the elevator is broken, so he takes  
    the stairs instead.

    And he asks the man at the desk  
    if he can recommend a good bar,  
    and the man asks, *Where's your friend?*

The doors open automatically at his movement.

    In the parking lot, the boy looks up  
to the window, recognizing the TV's dull glow  
    pulsing in the room.

2.

    In this version, you leave  
together. At the park by the highway,  
    cicada calls mix with the lamplight's  
grind, a new static. A man  
    sits on a bench, his hand aloft  
as if conducting—on the tip of his finger he holds  
    a signaling firefly.

    The boy repeating *I've been*  
    *in your mind, and it was a vision. I've been*  
    *in your mind, and it was a nightmare.*

He pulls you closer, presses his mouth to yours,  
    grit of your beard, grit of his beard,  
the moon refracting off of the lake.

3.

You wake up in the hotel.

    The boy shaking you, shirtless,  
    curled hair writing  
questions across his chest.  
    He's asking you to say something

crass to make him hate you.  
All you can do is feel him on top  
of you, think about his  
incisors, just out of line  
with the rest of his teeth.  
*Say something awful!* he yells.  
He's shaking you.  
He knows he is leaving.

4.

Four sides of the same coin,  
four dreams, four different ways  
of telling the same fucking story.  
Four more turns of the kaleidoscope,  
the pieces of the world falling  
into another set of outcomes.  
This is the one  
where you've never even met the boy.  
This time, you write your own story  
about a little girl holding her mother's hand in the rain,  
her black raincoat iridescent  
under the streetlamps. Nothing  
suggestive about it—just words  
on a page. This is the version  
in which you drink a little too much  
and you tell your friends  
*I just wish I could feel the way that you do.*  
*I just wish—*

5.

You've picked up someone at a bar,  
someone else. Lying next to him,  
waiting for sleep to take you,  
shadows from the window  
making his face seem more interesting  
than it actually is. Reminding you  
that you've always liked your people  
a little scarred, a little broken.  
People who aren't afraid to show  
the ways they've been hurt.

His face is nothing like that.

6.

You're back in the hotel. The balcony  
door is open—curtains blowing in the wind,  
it's like you're in a movie. You  
see him standing against the rail,  
you run out, he says *Having a body*  
*is the greatest bourdon the soul*  
*can bear. I'm asking too much of it.*

7.

His eyes shine, sharp as obsidian.

8.

How futile  
your efforts have been to fill that void,  
the attempt to fill a copper kettle  
with spoonfuls of fresh snow,  
the burner on high.

## Letter for T

I came up for air  
after submerging my head in the bath,  
and I thought I heard you calling my name  
in the water as it ran out  
of my ears, and I felt you draining away.

These days, you're present  
in the dustpan, the bookshelf, the row  
of coffee cups in the cupboard.

Anything can hold a vacuum.  
The last time I saw you,  
you sat across the table  
like a bouquet of withered wildflowers  
in an old Ball mason—so ruined— but you looked  
beautifully strange, reshaped  
through the bottom  
of a rocks glass.

I know this is too much for me to ask,  
but let's use this as an exercise in cessation:  
Step closer. Press your hand  
flat against mine. I want you  
to tell me about the universe  
that is contained inside  
your opening palm.

II.

THE MUSICIAN

## Transverse of Venus

I spend so long in the shower  
the soap softens. I slide my thumb  
into the bar, warm lye pillowing  
around it in a broken plume.  
Every time I put my mouth on  
my lover's body, I think *I have been  
here, and I have been here, and  
I have been here*, my rough chin  
grazing his collarbone. Once,  
while wandering the campus  
where I worked, I came upon  
a group of amateur astronomers,  
gathered to watch the transverse of Venus  
in front of the sun. They invited me  
to peer into their telescopes, specially  
rigged so I could look directly  
into the eyes of Sol Invictus.  
I saw a great sphere, a small black dot  
near its meridian. They'd spent all  
afternoon watching her block an imperceptible  
amount of daylight. Every time I take  
a step, I think *I have been here,  
and I have been here, and I have  
been here*. My lover's hair smells  
of fresh-cut cedar. He spikes his shampoo  
with the scent, because otherwise  
it would smell like nothing.

## **Holding On**

*Work endangers passion*, you whisper. You're stealing time from practice to serve food at some second-rate Mexican restaurant. And here I thought dating another artist would make for mornings spent in bed and lazy afternoons at my favorite café. You have to go—I pull you closer so I can feel the strong muscles of your back, toned from so much yoga practice, and pause for a moment, enjoying our stillness. You dress and leave. I watch from my third floor window as you walk down the sidewalk until you turn the corner. I return to bed, where the folds in the blankets open to welcome back my form, expecting yours to follow.

## **Iris**

I've been reading Santayana at my work desk,  
your suggestion. He says  
a book should act like a book

if left on a table, and a box  
of hats should stay in the attic,  
vacuums waiting for heads.

Your iris, now with two blossoms,  
remains by the stone wall  
because I leave it there each morning.

I wiped the same places over  
and over, straightened and re-straightened  
the knickknacks on the shelf,

and you said it was like watching a man  
going mad or at least unraveling.  
I was certain I could make it right.

Someone had cut one  
of the blooms from your iris,  
and I was afraid to ask if it was you.



—

Consider wakefulness, how you said,  
*If I never sleep again, I'll never have to see him again.*  
That plan never works.

—

## Scenes

1.

You've pulled out your  
heart to show it to the boy,  
removed it from your chest  
to show its pulsing  
against the room's cold  
air. The show's about to start.

2.

As a child you ran  
from room to room  
to every mirror  
always hoping to find  
a different face.

3.

*Sacred heart, desire of the everlasting hills.  
Sacred heart, pierced with a lance.*

4.

You and the boy  
in his car one winter  
night, all limbs  
and mouths. Frost  
forming crystals on  
the windshield—he stops.  
*They look like blood veins.*

5.

It's an old vaudeville  
act, a real song  
and dance.  
Outside, a man asks

for change, muttering  
to everyone  
who passes him.

6.

In Texas  
a child is born  
with his heart  
beating outside  
of his chest—forced  
to bare his pulse  
for the world.

7.

*Sacred heart, overwhelmed with reproaches.  
Sacred heart, obedient even unto death.*

8.

The broken mirror  
on your back porch,  
its pieces glinting  
like a perverted constellation.  
They draw the curtain for  
the second act, that shaking  
thing held in your hand.

## **Philosophy**

Circadian rhythms will encourage these trees  
to clamber for the sky only to be met  
by lightning. The man I love will never return  
my love as much as I require, and those who cycle  
out of my consciousness will always return  
with a different voice, a weathered face. I remember  
my mother's whispered verses—

*This is the way we pray. This is the folding of hands.*

My tongue hardened, a stone that would not move.

## Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D Major

*The call of love sounds very hollow among these  
immobile rocks.*

—Gustav Mahler

Winter comes, makes it so much harder to keep track  
of anything. The moon is a curved blade in the marbled sky.  
In the windowsill, the web I cannot clear away from the spider  
I could not bring myself to kill. A tunneling spider, it lived  
in the cylinder of thread it built in my absence this summer.  
All that remains: the disintegrating web, trembling  
as the air shifts, still holding a fly, a discarded carapace.  
I fill the tub with water and foam, put on  
Mahler's first symphony. Once, a musician I loved  
invited me to see him perform the piece, called *The Titan*  
for its grandeur and difficulty. Seated in the auditorium,  
I spent the evening watching the top of his head bob  
behind the music stand, keening my ear to locate the notes  
which came only from him. Of passion, Empson told  
his lethargic students they couldn't feel it until they read  
Swinburne by moonlight, tears running down their cheeks.  
What if all I can say is, *When he told me he no longer  
loved me, I saw a gale through a cluster of willows.* I listen again.  
Mahler's opening notes—clarinet and oboe—attempt  
to imitate birdsong. The musician listened for weeks  
to recordings of meadowlark and thrush to achieve just  
the right intonation. My hand rises with the accumulation  
of notes. My knees in the water are two sinking islands.

*First Movement*

Birdsong reminds me of childhood mornings, my mother's days as an avid birdwatcher commanding spring weekends. She taught me stillness, the importance of quiet. Coming from I didn't know where, songs from thrush, from meadowlark, echoing in the woods. She'd show me the pictures in her pocket *Audubon*, paintings of the birds he shot right out of air. I've grown obsessed with old photographs. I dig through piles of them at junk stores—posed families, lockjawed at the camera's lengthy exposure, farmhouses, infant deaths dressed for the parents not wanting to forget. I've covered a whole wall with ancient black-and-whites, windows into the past. At the bottom of a bag I hadn't used in months, I found a roll of film I'd forgotten to develop. On it, pictures from a hiking trip last spring. As I leafed through the prints—scenic pastoral, trillium blooming, mossy branch—I found the musician, bent down, studying a rock at an overlook. Beaming.

*Second Movement*

It's my birthday, and the bar's special tonight is sangria. We lift our glasses in a toast and take a sip, the generous portions of wine in our glasses shining like the nighttime sea. I fish out a chunk of apple from the glass and eat it, the light flesh turned dark and dense and tannic. Last September, my cousin revealed to our family that she'd had a baby back in April. The father was also her employer, and she'd kept the child in hiding for fear of her not-yet-ex-husband. As I held the secret-child in my arms, I placed my finger in her palm, and by her natural response, she gripped it. What kind of strange new form was I to her? It must be a kind of joy, this unexpected life. My mother already mourns the grandchildren she fears lost. The pieces of fruit float in our wine like icebergs.

*Third Movement*

Time I throw away the bowl of apples on the counter.  
Their bruises grow deeper with age, never healing.  
Not that I have difficulty letting go of things  
like this. It's what they represent—the fact  
that I might not be the kind of person I'd like to be.  
Mahler was 36 by the time his first symphony received  
acclaim, at a time when he was questioning  
his Jewish upbringing. The musician told me  
that his third movement depicted a host  
of woodland animals carrying a hunter to his  
grave, set to the tones of a lilting Eastern European  
folksong. Bear and fox, hare and wolf bearing the man's weight  
on their shoulders. I'm sleeping with a man I will never love.  
Sometimes, we don't even speak. He knocks  
on my apartment door, smiles when I answer.  
Afterwards, he smokes a cigarette on the fire escape  
while I wait inside. I lie in bed, listen to his too-heavy  
breathing. My arms, my back, everything aches.  
When he is gone I will take a shower, try to wash off  
the smell of sweat and sex, his cheap cologne.



*Fourth Movement*

A girl walks into my favorite café, sits down next to my table. On her blouse hangs a smell I know immediately—the perfume worn by the last woman I ever dated. I remember our lovemaking—if you could call it that—our awkward, passionless attempt at making it work. Her string of pearls, the clear pink bottle's atomizer bulb, the way she'd aim it directly at her open throat. One morning, showering with the musician, I reminded him that I never ate breakfast in my apartment. The clear vinyl curtain softening the lines of everything in the bathroom that wasn't us, his body, so like mine, in the steam, wet and dripping, bright and clean as a new day. After we ate bagels at the café, the sidewalk filled with students and commuters, the crowd packed as tight as a zipper. He needed to leave for work, and I watched as he walked away, his blond head disappearing into the rolling tide of bodies. Dear Empson, I've felt passion, but what if all I can say is *When he told me he no longer loved me, I heard a string section's building staccato*. Tonight—I always forget it—is jazz night. The trio fills the air with a kind of static, the accretion of such a layered chaos almost too much. The girl must be waiting for someone—she checks her phone. Her perfume saturates the air. Notes from the tenor sax fill the room, and I look up, reach my hand towards the ceiling, as if I were able to catch one.

## Expansion

The painting we bought together,  
our favorite record still on the turntable,  
diamond-tip needle suspended,  
playing the room's silence.

I keep unearthing memories  
like jars of honey sealed  
in some pharaoh's tomb—  
still sweet when put to the tongue.

A book about space seems to fall  
open of its own accord. *The galaxies  
are increasing the spaces  
between themselves.*

Kepler declared that the planets sing in orbit,  
the Earth with notes of *Mi, Fa, Mi. In this our home  
misery and famine hold sway—*  
the planets hold together  
and push apart through song.

At the diner down the street, I think  
about our last conversation.  
Your reasons for leaving  
do not satisfy the growling void  
of the bed's empty space, its vacuum.  
The pie of the day is reheated blackberry,  
the top crust laid out  
in a carefully-designed lattice.

The fruit glistening  
with sugar and cornstarch,  
each blackberry is its own cluster of dark stars.

## Letter for the Musician

In the dream where  
you have not yet left

me, we are talking  
about the cosmos again.

Not the useless  
science of planetary

alignments, houses  
and constellations, but

the realities of the universe.  
Distances so great we

measure them by tracking  
the way light travels.

You say, *There are stars  
the size of this city*

*and a thousand times  
denser than lead,*

*small dying things who,  
in their final millennia*

*turn themselves to metal  
in their desperation.*

We're sitting on the bay  
window seat. A wren lands

on the feeder. Your mouth  
opens and the building staccato

of *Symphony in C*  
bursts forth, every note

struck perfectly.  
In a moment, we appear

in space, and we are orbiting  
some distant star, not

our own. Your mouth stays  
open, though in the place

of sound comes a spiral  
cloud of black feathers.

---

Remember the late-night walk  
you took, the broken refrigerator abandoned  
in the alleyway, door fallen open and spilling out  
with cicada shells.

---

## No Note

I park down the street, drive  
with headlights off, to leave  
the book I'd borrowed  
on your doorstep. A collection  
of essays you thought I'd enjoy,  
I've tried to undo the dog-eared corners.  
But the paper would not release  
the creases—they remain like  
perfectly-angled scars. Taking inventory  
of the flowers we'd planted together,  
the gladiolus and pansies look up  
at me like abandoned children,  
and the moonflower vine on the small trellis  
is wilted—root-bound, self-suffocating,  
and in need of replanting. I take it with me,  
but leave no note. What could I say  
to your shadow, projected through the curtains  
and scattered across the lawn?

## **It's not**

that I found his absence  
grew in the time since he left—  
it's that I found myself changing  
to be more like him.

Toast with breakfast, always  
sourdough, hot yoga twice  
each week, even a haircut  
just like his—short  
on the sides, long up top,  
slicked back with shiny  
pomade. Looking for comfort  
in Stravinsky's *Symphony in C*,  
I found none, but still refused  
to believe that my answers  
could come from anywhere else  
but from him.

## Symphony of Psalms

*I haven't understood a bar of music in my life,  
but I have felt it.*

—Igor Stravinsky

### *First Movement: Ostinato*

The musician and I were never good at speaking.  
We couldn't find the words. We found new ways of speaking.

We talked about art & film, never how we felt. This is the problem  
with men: we're taught against that kind of speaking.

Night's we'd fuck, I loved the primacy. Letting  
our hands, torsos do all the speaking.

He wanted to hear another's oboe play the part in Stravinsky's  
*Symphony of Psalms*. We sat still in the theatre, not speaking.

We climbed the old fire tower, stood in silence  
listening to the ghosts of the valley and their speaking.

I close my eyes and hear him calling *Jim!* in an unlit bedroom.  
These, our two bodies, our only way of speaking.



*Second Movement: Double Fugue*

How have I made it this long without  
smoking? I duck into a corner store,  
emerge with a pack of red Dunhills in my coat pocket.  
At home I watch two straight men on the screen  
having sex for money. The director's notes say  
*Josh is learning to like it.* I stop the film, study the arch  
in his back, the look on his face containing  
both pleasure and pain. Every life needs a little  
impurity. Outside, I take one from the pack  
& smoke it down to the filter, cough out the char.

*Third Movement: Allegro*

The sopranos smear a blue note across the auditorium's canvas. Their voices move like a trombone's slide from one pitch to the next. The musician says *Trombone players are obnoxious. The singers we're working with are great—better than the symphony.*

When I was thirteen & wandering the wrong parts of my mother's hometown, low sun broadcasting autumn's sincerity across the river, my cousin Sarah & I broke in to the old Gem Theatre, boarded up since '78. We found a landscape of dust. Empty film canisters covered the floor of the old projection room, and the corner of a poster winked from the wall, still begging us to *See Doris Day in The Glass Bottom Boat*. We sat in the balcony, listening to what Cage would call a masterpiece, the speakers dormant, projecting their own symphony of silence.

After his performance, the musician tells me about the notes he missed, how the brass section played too loudly. We sip Mexican beer from cans & make out at a party. The next day I look up what all those Latin words meant, but even if I cannot understand them at least I can feel them, the chorus repeating *Laudate Eum. Laudate, laudate Domunum.*



Consider yourself as you are right now:  
a man sifting through desert sand  
with his fingers, searching for the key  
you have lost to the glowing whitehot room  
that passion constructed within your mind.  
Envision the room, how it made you feel  
to inhabit that space for a time.  
Break the room.



## Failed Love Poem

We woke in a room of open  
umbrellas, we woke  
at the bottom of a lake.

& then there was the leaf  
tattoo, floating across  
his shoulder on illustrated wind.

The way he said *Love, for you,*  
*is a different kind of love. I could never*  
*have the capacity to satisfy you.*

His one glossed eye, like a marble,  
the asymmetry it made  
of his face.

## Little Fugue

*after Eduardo C. Corral*

Sometimes, the memory of him playing  
runs backwards. The notes leave the room, return  
to the end of his instrument, back to his body.

I close my eyes and see him making reeds  
at his workbench. He sharpens the knife  
on the spinning wheel, the blade glowing.

The first time I knelt for a man, my hands shook,  
reaching for his waistline. His smooth torso shone.  
The moon in the window was a fully-clenched fist.

Shaping the cane, he shapes the notes themselves.  
He ties up each mouthpiece with a length  
of thread, singeing the ends with a match.

## Morning Song

I wake to the sound of chainsaws—Bill's Tree Service  
dismantling a tremendous oak next door.

Starting with the outer branches,  
they work it down to the bare trunk.

By day's end, they'll have ground the stump—

leaving nothing but the roots  
slowly turning back to dirt.

Three years now  
and I'm learning how to love another man.

I look over, watch him heave a deep breath.

I feel guilty when the musician's body  
appears in my mind when we're together—

I don't tell him about it.

Sometimes, I hear the musician's corrections  
to the way I said words or formed ideas.

To my occasional stammerings,  
my occasional ignorance of fact.

Some men are fated to die young,

to have their bodies give in too soon  
to many cancerous growths.

Others, to live all their lives in genius or madness.

Perhaps mine is to find the musician and carry him  
always in my mind like the director of a chorus

providing a constant critique—

*If you aren't singing loud enough,  
you aren't singing at all.*

*Sing.*