

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

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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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.