

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: MYSTIC, GEORGIA

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Master of Fine Arts, 2014

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*Mystic, Georgia* interrogates connections to nature, society, imagination, and the self. Telling a story of childhood set in the village for which the collection is named, the first part examines family, identity, and memory. The second part explores landscape and witnesses the transformation of childhood's "strange voice" to the "song" of adulthood, and the ensuing part deepens this transformation, contemplating the strangeness of poetic acts. In the fourth part, attention turns to the complexities of society and a disquieting materiality. The collection culminates in a journey out of self-doubt and into the nature of want. Night and dark, storytelling, and the moment's ephemerality are deeply figured motifs in *Mystic, Georgia*, which strives for a coherent vision of an intractably blurred world.

MYSTIC, GEORGIA

by

Joshua Lavender

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2014

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2014

## **DEDICATION**

*for my father*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publications in which these poems first appeared, mostly in different forms:

*Able Muse* 12 (2011): "The Guest"

*Free State Review* 3 (2014): "Mystic, Georgia"

*The Southern Poetry Anthology*, vol. 5: Georgia (2012): "The Death of the Grapevine" (appeared as "The Death of Auntie Bellum's Attic")

*Town Creek Poetry* 8.1 (2014, online): "Orchard" and "Dollar Store"

## **THANKS**

My sincere thanks to the members of the Advisory Committee for their guidance in the preparation of these poems, and also to the faculty of the English Department, especially Maud Casey and Gerard Passannante, for three years of illuminating study.

And my warmest thanks to those who have supported my life as a writer. Foremost among these is my family, but I also thank Herbert Shippey, Jeff Newberry, Martin Lammon, and Alice Friman for their mentorship; Rebecca Norton for enduring friendship; and Laura Newbern, especially, for a faith far surpassing my talents.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Thanks .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
A Poem .....	1
DIRTY CHIAROSCURO .....	2
Mystic, Georgia .....	3
Orchard .....	4
The Caul of Wasps .....	6
Record .....	7
Ars Orandi .....	8
Memory .....	10
Dollar Store .....	12
Little Mama's House .....	14
WHAT SPEED THEY HAVE .....	15
Communion .....	16
Inside the Wind .....	17
Lines Written during a Period of Insomnia .....	19
The Other Side of the Creek .....	20
Hymn .....	22
Inside the Wind ( <i>reprise</i> ) .....	23
A MENAGERIE .....	24
Duende .....	25
For a Storyteller .....	26
Caesura .....	27
Tongue .....	29
The Poem That Became a Ghost .....	31

SO TWATTLED MAYHAP .....	33
The Death of the Grapevine .....	34
Erstwhile .....	35
Job Hunting .....	37
Checkout .....	38
Timber Rattler .....	39
Strange .....	41
Dalliances .....	43
Two Flames .....	45
 PEARL .....	47
Southern Crescent .....	48
The Guest .....	49
Thready Pulse .....	51
Boomerang .....	52
Litany of Want .....	54
 Notes on the Poems.....	55

## A POEM

For my mother up before daybreak cracking  
eggs in the skillet,  
for my father's sweat, for his overtime,  
his herniated disc,  
for my uncle John's sixty-mile midnight drive  
to fix my car,  
for Little Mama schooling me in the gospel  
with her magnifying glass,  
and my brother, who without understanding  
saw me dance with suicide,  
because I have nothing else to give.

Because the moon has something to give,  
it's a tipping bowl,  
because sounds are the several hands  
of the goddess vision,  
I hear a howling from the wilderness  
of the womb,  
give me a pen, paper, a stretch of time.

Give me a death letter blues,  
make me an angel that flies from Montgomery,  
let my tongue become a bell.

Let a felt depth deliver me from night,  
give me words and the patience to say them,  
the patience to say them—I'm trying to save my life  
for the sake of those who already saved it.

ONE

## *Dirty Chiaroscuro*

## MYSTIC, GEORGIA

A clump of houses, sheds, Baptist churches—  
you'll hardly know you're passing through a town  
except for a lone green sign, the name  
underscored by "UNINCORPORATED." Iron grates

in the cannery's windows, rusted shut:  
half a century out of business. Where Bugle Lane  
joins the highway there's an oil-stained lot,  
gas pumps with dials instead of digits. Turn up

this road. You'll meet a brick-and-tin monolith,  
the old country store, keeping vigil over a weed-thick  
junkyard of gutted VW Bugs. Behind it,  
the neatly kept post-office lawn breaks faith

with all that lies about. Park the car, get out,  
stretch your legs beneath the trees. Oaks, pines,  
here and there a magnolia, some jostling limbs,  
skirmishing for more sky. All the houses

stay silent. Lots of old people here, staying  
indoors. Except for how gossip travels,  
who'd ever know this hole-in-the-wall has two sides?  
White folk drive to their churches on the highway,

black folk walk to theirs in the woods, somewhere  
behind the boarded-up industrial school.  
Everyone's more or less poor. They send kinfolk  
to Fitzgerald for pills; they grow food at home.

Put your hand to the ground, feel for the slow  
pulse of this place. Rattlesnake round-ups.  
Stray cats. Screen doors want mending.  
The land sleeps. Already vast, night expands.

## ORCHARD

Its dusk was like the dark dream  
crossing the eyelids in a fever.  
Poverty's dirty chiaroscuro.  
When did I first see this starvation  
of light was a soul's face, my soul  
laid over a pivot of twilight?

My eyes shut fast in the dazzle  
of sudden sun. And with my kinfolk,  
night lingered in pinpricked veils.  
I couldn't see their work, their weeping,  
only splayed fingers, how a pecan tree  
seems to stretch like a body yawns.

Pecan, he's a cranky old soul.  
His bark is grime and grit for eyes,  
scaled roughness for a climber's pain.  
His plagues number into the Egyptian:  
leaf spot, heart rot,  
bracket fungus, blotch, scab.

A scourge of webworms cocoons a branch  
like eye-sleep—it dies. It's hewn,  
consigned to a fire. The smoke tastes  
of quinine. Stooping to harvest pecans,  
I learned nothing came as quick  
as ache in the calves. There was this too:

the catkins withered, spun to ground,  
and their stains never washed away.  
Each year, my family's Plymouth Champ  
sank deeper in the dapple-dark.  
Like Little Mama's sight, her eyes  
boring back in her skull. And now

...

there's my returning, always returning  
to that dusk, to the glistening  
that takes my eyes beneath the trees.  
Somehow, strangers. And a strange voice,  
wind in the leaves—no, someone's crying.  
Who is that, crying here beside me?

## THE CAUL OF WASPS

*for my brother*

Jacob, listen, you know this story  
but not the way it strays in my darkness.  
Once, when we lived in the orchard,  
I pulled the tarp from a motorcycle frame  
and found a nest in the engine's hollow:  
a storm cloud, black and bright  
with sway, jut, flap, shudder of wings,  
a stirring nearly still in my alarm.  
I saw it, then it swallowed me.  
And here's my secret: I came to life  
in that dagger-dance, its time a plunge  
in deep water. I was electric, quick  
as breeze but as heavy as a horse, stung  
to a bray, swaddled in a caul of wasps  
crawling me like a fever dream  
or sheet lightning in a thunderhead.  
*Stay, my brain stuttered inside*  
*this coming-alive, stay right here.*  
As if, for the first time, I'd drawn breath.  
But rescue came: our father scooped me  
into his arms, ran me bawling like murder  
for the trailer door. That was the last  
of everything but the squalls of pain.  
That night, I smarted in the dark  
we shared—thin as a splinter—as rain  
hurled against the roof and the pecan trees  
creaked. We lay wide-eyed for the danger  
of twisters, telling each other stories,  
whispers swarming like angels above us.  
Our goodbyes were being born.

## RECORD

I found it in the discards,  
a string quartet by Schubert.

It had drifted untouched  
for fifty years: a crowd settling,

sighing as the players rosin their bows.  
I gave up my pocket change,

went home and carefully ripped  
away the plastic. It spun

in the hands, jet and grooved,  
lovely. There was a moment

as I eased the needle down  
when it seemed almost symbolic,

a violated thing. A bit later  
the music began, it was meant

to be heard. Can you hurt  
a thing? Bring it screaming

out of the womb of its dullness,  
tear it from a silent life?

I remember a pronouncement  
of my father's: it's simply

impossible to love a thing  
because that love can never

be returned. And I wondered then  
whether he had ever loved my mother.

## ARS ORANDI

My uncle Robert could make Thanksgiving prayer last until what you prayed for most was for him to somehow stumble into the end of it. We were gathered for this ritual around Little Mama's table, which Grandpa had built atop the treadle-base of a Singer sewing machine—all of us, I mean, except Grandpa himself, who seemed to have no use for prayer. Maybe he thought mowing the lawn at Grace Baptist Church, whether or not paid to do it, was penance enough. He sat in his usual chair, tending the Schrader woodstove, a bellows at hand and also a spittoon for his Bloodhound tobacco.

How I envied that unorthodox Alabama farmer as, all thanks given that he could think of, Robert began rattling off supplications, enumerating the names of all the people present, and some that weren't: the ill and aggrieved, servicemen stationed overseas, a ne'er-do-well cousin serving a prison stretch.

Robert had half a dozen brothers and one sister. They and all their children deserved his best mention to the Almighty, whose works are wondrous to behold, whose dominion compasses the earth and all its people, even the heathens. . . . For a while, as he labored on in pious description, my mind wandered out the door, underneath the willow tree in the backyard, then off toward the woodshed with its mysterious boxcar, and finally down to the creek flooding slowly over with the elephant's-ear fronds of wild dasheen.

It was no use. I couldn't stay out there forever, amen.

Now Robert was praying for the souls of politicians—if a liberal, that he might see the light, and if a righteous, God-fearing conservative, that God would continue to guide his path and bring blessings upon our nation.

...

I imagined my aunt Judy was biting her lip just now,  
the sole Jehovah's Witness in a houseful of Baptists,  
and I stole a glance across the room of bowed heads.  
Hers might have been the deepest bowed; her mouth  
moved fervently in its own silent oration. And then,  
since it was plain Robert wouldn't finish up anytime  
before Rapture, the temptation became too much:  
I took a long look round. Another truant stare  
(I forget whose) met mine but instantly went down  
closing its eyes again. I ventured a quick peek  
through the doorway that opened to the living room.  
Grandpa was rubbing distractedly at the place where  
his wooden leg, acquired when a car he'd been under  
slipped off the jack, joined his kneecap. He'd worked  
in the coal mines too, sometimes drew ragged breaths,  
and had a few fingertips missing as well, gone  
God knows where. But his eyes always twinkled.  
Why, the sacrilegious old rascal was winking at me!  
In hindsight, I guess I should have looked away,  
repented the moment's weakness, resumed praying.  
But I winked back. And so began my glorious descent  
into apostasy—a cursed, graceless, sinful state  
that no litany however lengthy can save me from now,  
I know. Because I've sinned fit to burst ever since,  
and if sinning can teach you an art, it's prayer.

## MEMORY

The oven propped open—even now I feel  
the itchy warmth gathering in the kitchen.  
In our bedroom, small as a monk's cell,  
there was a chink in the wall's paneling,  
about my eye's height. Down that hole  
Jacob and I dropped any coins we found.  
We didn't know the horde was forever lost:  
we must have thought those coins fell  
straight to dirt. Studs and plates in a wall  
were things we knew nothing about.  
So we waited for the king snake to die.  
He'd made his den in the trailer's crawlspace,  
and Dad let him stay to ward off other snakes.  
"Better a king than rattlers," he said, and we  
were forbidden ever to go under the house.  
I don't recall now if that snake ever died.  
When nothing happens, it's hard to remember  
even what a day was like. But the accidental  
gives memory a warp and weft. And then  
I can say, "That was the day Dad lost the keys  
in the ocean off Jekyll Island. So far out  
from shore, his pivoting arms made him look  
like a fishing seagull. The waves were tall:  
the day was windy. Jacob was small enough  
to squeeze through the Champ's back window."  
Now I can't see the face of my grandfather,  
Tom Carver. I have wisps of Granny's chatter:  
if the two of you were playing rummy  
and you laid four-of-a-kind breaking up  
his straight, he'd lose his temper and quit.  
He died of diabetes; I don't remember that.  
But I recall finding his *Playboy* magazines  
hidden in the cabinet behind Granny's chair.

...

And her jabber stuffed with swearing,  
the coarse carpet of her singlewide trailer,  
the keys hanging on hooks by the door,  
Brillo pads, a four-poster's jutting springs,  
and the respirator's purr. The whisper  
that stayed once the sand of her voice  
had ebbed away. I never guessed then how  
stretches of memory—a road's ochre dust,  
a sepia-toned photo of a woman ankle-deep  
in a creek—wear down nearly to nothing.  
Or how you yearn for them, years later,  
for a little something left, like buried treasure.

## DOLLAR STORE

Most are regional chains now, the only way  
to keep afloat in a Wal-Mart-fleeced economy,  
but the one my mother shopped in Ocilla—  
called Bill's—was locally owned and owned  
its part of the town's squalor, by the late '80s  
impossible even for a kid to miss. It squatted  
next door to the Red & White Grocery, a hub  
for the poor blacks across Fourth Street.  
Once-waxed floors got dirtier with each mopping,  
clerks more surly the longer they stayed there.  
If you've been dirt-poor, you know the deal.  
Minimum wage for eight hours at a register  
or unloading half a semi's load of inventory  
or the squat and rise, squat and rise of stocking  
and fronting the shelves so they look full.  
The cry in your back as you stand hands on hips  
smoking by the dumpsters, smoking Jacks—  
nastiest cigarettes ever made that you bum off  
the nastiest man you've ever met, you smell him  
every day, you wish to God he'd take a bath—  
while the boss leans with crossed arms against  
a door he doesn't trust you to lock behind you.  
No overtime, no holiday pay. Laboring "at will,"  
meaning that son of a bitch doesn't need  
a reason to show you the other way out of here.  
Bill's closed for good when I was in high school,  
but I cheated the piss test and went to work  
at a Family Dollar in Fitzgerald, riding shotgun  
in my brother's truck to shifts matching his  
at the Piggly Wiggly across the parking lot.  
After work, we'd perch up on the toolbox  
passing a Black & Mild cigar and waiting  
for our friends to get off at their bullshit jobs.

...

They always came, cars rattling with overdriven bass, thonged girlfriends in backseats. Between the two-screen movie theater that never showed anything worth seeing, pool on worn-out tables, dragging back roads, a quest for dope or shine, we chose a place to be for the night, some of us for the rest of our lives. That was the best Fitzgerald had to offer. Ocilla had nothing, not even a goddamn dollar store anymore.

## LITTLE MAMA'S HOUSE

*in Mystic, just off Bugle Lane*

Uncle Herman moves the broom to his other hand, offers me his firm grip as I sit on the edge of the blue concrete porch. He and Betty Jean have been cleaning the house, saying goodbye to the empty rooms. Aunt Judy's here, too, pulling weeds around the stoop. Betty Jean and Herman loll in the heat, swatting gnats, uneager to get back to work. I tug a cigarette from my pocket. The talk turns to Little Mama—in a nursing home now, looking after Grandpa. "Yes, she's fine," I tell them, "she fell down and knotted her head on a baseboard, but she's fine. She doesn't like it much out there." Judy volunteers: "I knew she wasn't going to. They don't have hardly nothing to do in that place." Then Betty Jean: "Well, she couldn't have hung on here much longer." This old house: Grandpa built it up around a trailer until he wasn't game enough to keep going. Took a decade. All through my childhood the upstairs was an enticing place, and when the family had a big gathering I'd sneak up and spend an hour digging through the boxes my uncle James had in storage there. Or venture out onto the crossbeams of the unfinished room over the dirt-floor garage, where I could watch Grandpa working on lawn mowers. Washed the grease off his hands with gasoline. A few years back, when the cancer and the first stages of Alzheimer's set in and it was clear Grandpa would never work again, uncle John tore down the second story and finished off the roof. And now the house belongs to the state, mortgaged for medicine. No one has the money to buy it back. They think I could: "You should, you could put it right. You were always coming out to visit." *No, I shouldn't and I can't.* Judy keeps weeding, I don't know why.

TWO

## *What Speed They Have*

## COMMUNION

*at Andalusia*

Sprawled in rockers on the screened front porch,  
we tell jokes over coffee. A volume of stories,  
spine crinkled like laundry before ironing,  
lies winged in my lap. I've come in the morning,  
broken your routine. In the downstairs parlor  
transfigured by bed, Morris chair, and typewriter,  
a page clean as new linen curls itself to the scroll.  
But you assure me, you don't mind company.  
I roll a cigarette, one-handed. Your crutches  
stretch like old dogs at your feet. Humming,  
I gaze through the screen to where the sun climbs  
and a breeze stirs the oaks. "The morning's  
so fine," I say, "any time now God may amble  
out of the woods or walk up the lane from the gate  
and wave at us as He crosses the land." You nod  
in your faint way. Two redbirds thrash about  
the hedges a while, flutter far down the pasture  
to alight in pines. Then, furrowing your brow:  
"Or He might not wave at all. And that might be,"  
you muse, "a revelation." You clasp your cup  
between shaking hands and your voice sinks.  
I can't make out the murmured words, only feel  
their pulse fleet as gibberish. Or prophecy.

## INSIDE THE WIND

Ah my country of barns and grazing cattle,  
embodied fires full of cicada husks!  
Fires gnashing like a dog that barks a lot,

then hushes, feeding all forms of sleep.  
Such fire to pry open the sky, but my country  
is interfering with the offices of grief.

You can't cry there. I was of a broken kind;  
for this, my body was hung with a dark halo.  
The body of the fire, a paper bent by hand,

my country where secrets are windflaws,  
shade trees harbor breath, itself a body,  
and glimmer is fixed, small as a lit match.

•

Now an hourglass, as Orion tilts in the night's frame.  
I'm walking a dirt road, nothing close but the wind,  
miles from home. The moon is a large harvest, low

as a marble lid. Is any symbol right for it?  
At quarter a bowl, at crescent an eye shutting—  
no, it's nothing but itself. Its other face,

new, a thing the future hides. The road bends  
between fingers of woodland, breaking the touch.  
Dammed up at one side, a swamp yawns moonward,

water flat as a floor between cypress columns.  
The ess of a crossing water moccasin, *darkness*  
*upon the face of the deep*. I pick up a rock,

rough up the stillness. Water swirls in a basin  
below the dam, meanders through a drainpipe  
in the roadbed. On the other side it creeps away

...

under the shadow shed by leaves—slow, voiceless,  
a creek is beginning. Will it meet and marry a river?  
Images warp in the water, as if seen in a well.

The wind walks off in the tops of trees as I walk out  
into the green and herringbone of open fields,  
tangled fencerows. Briar, honeysuckle, poison ivy.

Nature in rampant run, clung with divination.  
A fatal sequence, what happens to a neglected fence.  
First the weft of barbed wire is wrapped in rust,

then a cling of vines pulls it into a lean earthwards,  
the strain of coiled bodies and weather yanks at  
any flaw, anything loose, sundering the law of line.

Past the row, boughs of oak cave over the road  
and a pool of shadow embraces me. A whippoorwill  
sorrows overhead, gloomed, a pulse in the ear.

At left hand, a bee gum hums in a crepe myrtle  
and a meadow stretches to woods, at its far edge  
a tumbledown tobacco shed. Going for a look,

I find the tin roof is rusted out. Through it  
peers a desolation of stars like crumbling stones  
in a churchyard. Circling round back of the wreck,

I surprise a fox glutting itself on a small animal.  
At my approach it lopes off into the brush, its kill  
dangling in its jaws. A scrabble-scrawl of leaves

on daggered earth, spectral as the crackling  
of a bonfire. Then a hush. Shut desire.  
The earth is too old: I cannot cut it clean.

## LINES WRITTEN DURING A PERIOD OF INSOMNIA

Not a haunting, not the second life of nightmare  
or a question starving for its answer—instead,  
this reasonless time and so much of it, where  
my brain tiptoes on some brink. Things to do,  
but somehow there's never the impulse to begin.  
A dial tone waits for numbers, a cup for washing,  
a blank page for the pen. I'd give the moon  
and all the night's images for a bit of shut-eye,  
for my mind to quit moving, let go of things,  
stop wearing them thin.

A few stars overhead,  
I stand on the lawn chain-smoking and debating  
with the grazing deer. Against its nature, a doe  
limps toward me on a luxated knee, maybe curious  
how I'm turning fire into fog. Her buck spies  
from the roadside, inscrutable as a rock. She dips  
and lifts her head—a silent language, waiting.  
I squat and extend my hand. Then they show  
what speed they have: turning tail, they slip off  
into the dark, for one moment ferocious.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CREEK

This has to be the silliest thing I've done  
in quite a while: cutting off through woods  
in a beeline for my front door, for the hell of it,  
knowing good and well a creek runs  
between here and there, slow, wading-deep,  
definitely perpendicular to my purpose,  
with no dry way across I know of. It's dusk  
or close to it, the brisk cold of early March,  
snow still tufted where shadows stay.

What am I doing out here? There's nothing to see:  
deer droppings, fungus bracketing a rotten log,  
brambles. I stumble down a muddy embankment,  
stand over softly shoaling water. I've seen it often  
from the other shore, rambled down its length,  
paused on a bridge's hump a mile away or more  
listening to it chattering on amid the granite  
heaped in a man-made dam. But never from  
these woods, or this uncertain where I'm going.

Beyond the willows and the bare, vine-clung oaks  
hunkering by the creek as if spreading hands  
before a fire, across a marshy field and up  
a small hill, I see my house, the latticework's  
unvarnished wood almost close enough to touch.

I step to the water's edge, squat, and stare  
upstream, then down. As I thought: no stones.  
Going back the way I came, an old feeling  
grows on me—not the poetic transcendence  
of purity in nature, as on Frost his snowy evening,  
not quite. Simpler. What's called *Waldeinsamkeit*:  
wood-loneliness. I knew this well in childhood,  
when a day's tramping brought me unawares  
out of underbrush and into a strange clearing  
carpeted with low grass, populated by deathcaps

...

ringed like dancers around their solemn king,  
a deformed elm. The kind of place giving a form  
to fancy, to my notion—now embarrassing—  
that a tree might possess its own unknowable soul.  
And other such romance. By the time I regain  
the road's concreteness, the feeling has faded.  
I need to go soon. I hurry on, the sure way home.

## HYMN

Along the sleeping, listless bed of the creek  
it gathers, down from the tangled tops of oaks and up  
from the clay pans of sandy roads, see it moving,  
through the orchard's still, perpetual dusk,  
the startling stir of rattles somewhere close by,  
somewhere under palmetto or fern, you can hear it  
growing, shining from the gravestones by the church,  
a ghost for the mantle clock's gears, lurch and groan,  
reverberating in the sound hole of an Alvarez guitar  
and echoed even by the desolation of a broken bottle  
that glints like the far-off ring of stars  
in the night's roof. The night is full of the music:  
the complaints of sorrowing whippoorwills.  
Our lot is grief, they say, and the world is not  
large enough for all of it, there is no harbor,  
there was never room and no room will ever be again.  
And so we listen. And listening, remember—  
What was that? Did you hear someone whisper?

## INSIDE THE WIND

### REPRISE

The body of the fire in my country, so dark:  
a washboard dirt road, a briar-grown ditch.  
Nothing there is ever stronger than moonlight

and yet the fire is flashing all the time.  
The body of the fire is not the full moon.  
Still, in my country it's clear and often

it shines distractingly and makes the stars  
farther, fainter. It likes to stir things up.  
It stirred my body until I disappeared.

But I'm still here, and with me I carry fire  
like a rumor. Parting took away no part of me.  
My country, I put away your woe. Now I sing!

THREE

*A Menagerie*

## DUENDE

Unlatched this box of twilight steel  
forgets in a sweet unmaking the ephemeral walls  
and blooms from orchards fields fencerows  
an emptiness preceding dream and through direct energy  
like fire a horse of song spills  
bounds of speed without headwind  
and strengthened by wood outstripping weak mood  
goes heedless and derelict,  
remembers conceives cries to be  
the unclothed crucible of an echo  
if indeterminate still softly urgent  
out of simple urge, instinct unscripted  
as each moment has a silence and as fire fathomless  
outlives distance and stared at tattoos the eyes  
wherein language dies adrift,  
from words unmoored  
then the cry in the wilderness token a mystery, divine,  
yet is only a cry  
of wolves made peaceful as seeds on the breeze  
spurred on soundless but keening  
with earth's hunger uttering, make me a beast  
if I am not already a beast, make me a slave for I am  
a voice as full of need  
as the ocean is needful and also the stars,  
like them equal to what I eviscerate and what opens me  
sings knows believes  
and therein goes a vital animal  
to labor in the belly of my guitar.

## FOR A STORYTELLER

Surely when, his courage spurred by the moonshine's spell,  
he unraveled the shroud of a tale for the swine, the cattle,  
the taut-bellied goatherds who swelled the camp at dusk,  
and by the fire's cruel flicker some fidget-bottom would ask,

"Grandfather, just how big was this-here giant you met?"  
and he blinked and said, "Why, son, he were as big as a tree"  
(all the while knowing he had never said which tree — see,  
he had watched closely once as a master liar wove his nets),

he must have remembered to himself how that sly braggart,  
after the dullard One-Eye's defeat pricking his ears to the sea  
and all the hazard it held, heard only bluster or a bad joke

and, turning to his companions, gave no inkling they worked  
under a curse—for had they no faith in the stuff he spoke,  
and hadn't he, by a steep bluff, hacked Troy at the knees?

*after Rilke*

## CAESURA

And here, to interrupt a rambling tour  
of dreary rooms and shadowy passages,  
the poet throws an unsuspected door  
open on light. The scope of sight explodes.

The slightest pause, but world enough and time  
to touch the relics, see the frescoed walls,  
gape at the vaulted roof of archetype.  
You have to wonder, though, why has the room

turned out to be a dirty kitchen, strewn  
with unwashed pans, plates, cups, and tupperware?  
And what are all these creatures doing here?  
Is this a kitchen or a menagerie?

An aardvark hides his snout inside a pot,  
a departmental troop of ants advances  
on a sugar tin left open overnight,  
an elephant is staring down a mouse.

The zoo is not the worst of it, not with  
the poet's daddy issues, symbolized  
by Clem Kadiddlehopper beating eggs.  
He whisks with vigor, bleating sheepishly

for Shirley, who reclines against the fridge  
browsing a J.C. Penney catalog—  
the poet's mother? metaphor of loss?—  
to see if she can find the sassafras.

What's more perplexing, somehow, is the cloud  
of consonants that hovers overhead:  
abundant *P*'s and *S*'s. "Plenary"  
and "stoic" are particularly loud.

...

Why all this thunder? Can't the poet hear  
the roar his diction makes? And why these lines,  
why these atrocious, willy-nilly breaks?  
Did the poet *set* the meter loose?

But what a short reprieve—*caesura*: space  
of breath—to think about all this. Besides,  
the cat has crept into your Morris chair.  
She wildly flicks her tail against the page.

She won't be satisfied until she's fed.  
And come to think of it, you still have stacks  
of dishes in the kitchen, trash to haul  
out to the curb before your wife comes home.

You close the door and see the reader off  
with iambs waving from the final line.  
How tiresome, writing poems! How unlike  
your stoic, plenary, and mythic life.

## TONGUE

Now I must consider my cat Leonidas  
and his tongue, because he gets  
so very loud when it's time for me  
to be his valet. I'm alone at night  
except for him and the capricious  
pleasures in poems—all the strange  
possibilities in the world seem  
faded out. A cat's tongue is a rasp  
roughing over and over a lexicon  
of one word: *meow*. You might spell it  
*mew* or *miaou*, but that doesn't change  
the word and anyway cats don't care  
how you arrange things. Leonidas  
just wants fish from a tin can.

"The Fish" is a poem that swims up  
out of Elizabeth Bishop's solitude  
in the middle of a lake: here's  
the poet in a boat, a tremendous fish,  
and a rainbow, and there are three  
more rainbows for good measure.  
The lake, while the poet is busy  
tipping objects toward the light,  
remains silent as wallpaper. Please,  
let's put a cat in the boat to meow  
while Bishop goes about describing  
and deducing whatever victory there is  
in having caught what hadn't fought  
at all. The cat can eye the fish  
with the voracious possessiveness  
peculiar to cats, maybe feel resentful  
when its supper goes back in the water.  
It can't catch fish itself, and now  
this dunce lets a good catch go?  
What for? To sate her misguided sense  
of magnanimity toward the alien?

...

Is her idea of what's at stake here  
really that shallow? Or has she  
simply gotten all she can out of this  
grunting weight, so there's nothing  
left to do but watch the world spill  
over with *rainbow* in repetition?  
Instead of *rainbow*, the boat is now  
heaving with *meow, meow, meow*—  
damn it, Leo, would you cut it out?  
I can't open the can any faster. Or  
say what the poet ought to be doing  
when so much is available for play.  
One poet creates a heaven of animals,  
another travels through the dark,  
one digs a flowerbed, and yet another  
ripens with iterations of *blackberry*.  
My own dictionary, if I could ever  
find the dratted thing—it rambles  
around this house unpredictably,  
as if discontented—is packed thick  
with the coarse black flesh of poetry.  
Still, it's no help at all for seeing  
where a poem comes from, what it does,  
what it must do, or what you will do  
when suddenly it decides to fight.  
Poems don't behave like venerable fish.  
They act like cats, always underfoot,  
insisting on your rapt attention  
until they have it, then vanishing—  
a furry tail curls around a corner,  
a paw pokes out from under the couch.

## THE POEM THAT BECAME A GHOST

I can still see it there, hovering in the air  
above the interstate near Sweetwater, Tennessee,  
near an overpass scrawled with graffiti:  
a great flock of blackbirds looping endlessly  
like a working hand over faded parchment,  
pivoting as strangely as veins and arteries  
weave through a body. The traffic I was in  
had slowed to a crawl, then a total stop.  
An ambulance passed by in the grassy median.  
For a few seconds, watching the birds in cadence  
break their velocity, dive and soar in ligature—  
like a soul, a centrifuged loneliness—  
I lost my grip on the earth. Then fell sharp,  
pulled back inside my skin, again and forever  
earthbound. I wrote it down in my journal  
that evening, and two months later began  
to narrate it in lines of letters across a page,  
in words that flocked together, solid except  
for the right margin, which looked like wingtips.  
I imported alien images, naturalized them,  
chose and elaborated a metaphor—that business  
about blood vessels—and finally inched  
toward a closing figure that tried all at once  
to say something about the birds, the accident,  
my fellow travelers, and of course myself.  
It was supposed to be a poem. But it didn't fly  
as a poem ought to do. It perched on the page  
and croaked inanely, wouldn't get its act together.  
I took it to task, broke it up, trimmed its fat,  
streamlined the action and pieced the skeleton  
into first couplets, now tercets. Back and forth  
between the typewriter and the clipboard  
the drafts went, piling up notes and frustration.

...

I took it to school and showed it to other poets.  
"I wonder," a teacher wrote at the bottom  
of the eleventh draft, "why this experience  
of a brief imaginary indulgence is so arresting."  
By which he meant, where was my investment  
in the unfolding drama? I wondered about it, too,  
but thinking back to that evening—how cold  
it was, warming my hands at the dashboard vents,  
how the birds skewed and seemed to canter  
on gusts of wind—no answer came to light.  
It happened and there was something about it,  
that's all. Now the drafts hang in a file folder  
like outgrown coats in a closet, a flutter  
of second guesses, and all that remains is this  
poem that would not become a poem.  
It still caws in its little horrid way, as if  
lamenting clipped wings, but it's only a ghost  
of something written in the sky one winter dusk.  
Someday that's all that will be left of me, too:  
a few lines of text, fading away with weather  
until the eye strains to see the difference  
between the words and whatever failed to appear.

FOUR

*So Twattled Mayhap*

## THE DEATH OF THE GRAPEVINE

It begins with the torn-away roof, soft plinks  
on a mirror propped in the dark. Silent water  
rivulets down the decrepit face of the brick  
and puddles under a threadbare sofa,  
as if unready to sort out all the rummage.

In this basement, the root of the Grapevine,  
the town's forgotten scrapbooks are scattered  
alongside Zane Grey novels and cigar boxes,  
paralyzed typewriters, Coke bottles, Clue sets,  
trinkets, rings passed from mother to daughter.

The water inches higher, hoists first the chairs,  
then chessboards, a chaise lounge, empty trunks.  
Milk crates full of warped records jostle about:  
Eddy Arnold, out-of-print Lawrence Welk.  
A mannequin flails and drowns. Last of all,  
the fuse box high on the wall flings away  
a rain of sparks. 40-watt bulbs flicker out.

The facts reported by the *Union Recorder*  
end there. Still, in images that flash  
between their days and acts, the townspeople  
see water slipping into their basements—  
a flood to bear away the debris of their lives.

In a drenched dawn they huddle on rooftops,  
their children and their old shaking in blankets.  
Gazing at their town, now a lake, they pray  
for rescue—refugees from what began as only  
an accrual of the needless, only weeping.

## ERSTWHILE

Say a prayer now for fallen words, the mute  
vagrants that glance at you and then move off.  
They've been shamed out of use, exiled by scoffs;  
they live with riffraff, whores and profligates.

And it's no fault of theirs: they sound absurd,  
like a folksinger trotting out his songs  
of tramps and trains, but they're not really wrong.  
Their homes have been usurped by other words.

Verily makes his bed in holy books,  
which look like hovels in *The Lower Depths*.  
His brother Truly visits, wants to help,  
but has his own hardships (in debt to crooks).

There's not a thing Forsooth can do for them,  
lain in his grave of olden verse. And Eke ekes out  
her living as a verb, whilst Howbeit,  
now Be That As It May, has been condemned.

When was the last you heard of Lackaday,  
except the young man's cry for Barbara Allen?  
Methinks it likely death is with him dealing,  
so twattled Mayhap when he passed this way.

But these are not the saddest: sadder still  
are words we should be glad to use, like Fain  
and Cozen, Hark and Ruth. They're too arcane,  
we nowise wist what gaps they wish to fill.

And yet the gaps are there. Sanguinolent  
has no blood kin, Dwimmer-crafty no peer.  
Beef-witted people brabble, run Hither  
and Yon, they always will. Why not say it?

...

I see my gab tires you, but prithee stay  
a moment more. So monsterful, the world  
wants but a word to sing. Something unfurled  
this morning, when I met Apricity.

I was out lunting. Twitter-light had passed,  
my shoes were growing soggy from snowbroth,  
the chill was dismal. Then, as though a cloth  
had rent above, sunlight poured in. I basked.

## JOB HUNTING

My landlady, scrubbing peaches in the sink,  
suggests I fib on my résumé. I balk  
at such an idea. But she's right, I think.

Here's the problem: I'm outmoded. I've spent  
all morning listing skills and experience,  
but looking at it, I feel anachronistic.

How Kipling felt, perhaps, as industry  
consumed nature, leaving no place for men  
like Mowgli—close-to-earth, romantic beings.

I'm typing this on an old Smith Corona,  
dot-matrix paper. Corduroy jackets hang  
on the coat tree next to my beat-up cane,

and on a nearby table a pocket-watch ticks.  
Job descriptions give me anxiety attacks.  
I'd like to reinvent myself to work:

web design, a mastery of JavaScript,  
grant writing, educational leadership—  
even a carpenter's touch would bless me.

Not a bookworm or poet, nothing archaic,  
nothing that says I'm frivolous or messy.  
Even Mowgli at last left the wolf-pack

and chased the spring running in his blood,  
the path that led him back to the human brood.  
Man belongs with man, with his own age.

And I need timely work, some worthwhile gain.  
Instead I have this page, its marginal pain—  
looking back, and so eager to look again.

## CHECKOUT

How endless it seems, just as it always did  
when you were a kid and at the head of the line  
an illiterate old woman haggled over her cans,  
then handed the cashier a check to fill in.

The cashier's disappeared, along with her own  
dull incompetence. Now a girl with hair extensions  
scrambles between a dozen machines with an ID card.  
Checks and cash are relics too, replaced by debit.

But slowpokes are still everywhere. At this crawl,  
it may take years before you grab your receipt  
and bag your groceries: the one ahead of you now  
gapes at the computer's touchscreen navigation.

He picks items one by one from his cart,  
fumbles them around searching for barcodes,  
can't figure out how to ring up the avocados,  
and finally stands waiting for the clerk.

You should have brought a book. Just be content  
with the come-hither looks on photoshopped covers,  
Michelle Obama's secret love child, the *Time* piece  
naming Steve Jobs this year's Man of the Century.

Eventually you sort your stuff, a slowpoke yourself.  
Walking home between plastic bags biting the insides  
of your knuckles—you forgot to bring your own—  
you chant a reminder: "Put them in the recycling."

Which you also forget to do, you're so fatigued  
from standing in one place. In a blank moment  
before you go to bed, they go to the trash. Then  
to a landfill. One catches the wind and sails away

to a beach, gets pulled out by tide and thrown back,  
bunched with hundreds in a beached whale's belly.

## TIMBER RATTLER

The reason they were given such a name  
(we were told) was that they dropped  
out of trees around your neck.

That brought us up short: if you had  
to look both ways for the hand of God,  
plainly the world's a frightful mess.

The sprawl of countryside we lived in  
was called Rattlesnake Ridge.  
There was simply nothing for it.

You had to lug around a staff  
everywhere you went. Mine cut from  
a sapling was about yea high.

In tall grass, you would swing it out  
like a blind man's stick. Listen.  
I heard it once, like spilling

beads — I backed out of there quick.  
Now, with snakes, sometimes there's just  
no getting out of it. Say you met

a tenacious son of a bitch—the idea was,  
you could get some distance and set  
to clobbering the damn thing to death.

Sure, a gun's a good deal better, but then  
a farmer perched on his tractor (otherwise  
he might not have minded you cutting

along the edge of his field) taking you  
for a hunter, he'd run you off or worse  
call the sheriff. Some folk are kind

...

of fickle when it comes to their dirt:  
they allow one thing but not the other,  
couldn't care less about your intentions.

It's their land and they want it  
the way they want it. I don't see any  
sense in it, but then I never had any.

Anyways, a staff. I got so used to that grip  
that when I grew up and moved to a city,  
I took to walking with a cane.

Now, folk here carry their assumptions too.  
A stranger, thinking I'm handicapped,  
gives up her bus seat. And when I explain,

where I come from becomes a quirk.  
I was on a date once: the lady says  
*why the cane* and I say *for snakes*.

Well, she stares like I'm some hick  
and says *there ain't no snakes here,*  
*only people*. Same difference.

## STRANGE

Even the principal calls him this.  
An athlete, sixteen, a muscular boy  
scowling in a hoodie. They've made up  
their minds, that's all he can amount to:  
someone people call by his last name.  
Every morning he sits in the first row,  
as if making a point about his contribution,  
buries his face in an elbow, and sleeps.  
Sometimes there's movement, a sound  
of crinkling plastic—he's fishing  
potato chips out of the hoodie's pocket.  
You want to avoid a confrontation;  
you don't want to be just one more  
ugly confirmation of what he can expect  
from authority. You try coaxing him,  
but he responds by not responding.  
He's made up his mind, too: he won't  
speak to you. He keeps his head down.  
After a month of this, and conferences  
in the principal's office where he makes  
empty promises, your patience wears out.  
You slap a yardstick across his desk—  
the tactic your teachers used. Up comes  
the scowl and a second later the boy,  
looming in your face and swearing.  
Your co-teacher orders him from the room  
with a football coach's special authority,  
then at lunch gives you some advice:  
"Don't bother with Strange." So you don't.  
It's your first year teaching; you have  
enough trouble. Before the semester's out,  
the boy has disappeared. You never  
hear why. But you begin to think  
about a scrawny ten-year-old who wore  
a winter coat even in warm weather

...

and always sat in the back seat of the bus,  
wouldn't budge when towering seniors  
tried dislodging him. That was you.  
You think of all the bullshit you pulled,  
like a knife on a fellow Cub Scout.  
Once you smuggled a pair of oak branches  
whittled sharp onto the playground,  
threw one at a bully's feet and dared him  
to a sword fight. Some of your madness  
you can't remember, but your family says  
it happened and the evidence is there.  
Like the scar in your brother's scalp  
you made with a garden spade. You feel  
as if your childhood floated off in the past,  
in memory's fog—the truth going with it—  
and wonder whether you really grew up  
in the sticks, delinquency's hinterland,  
and whether you might have become  
another man. A brooding, explosive man.  
Or whether somewhere deep inside you  
that man lives anyway, silently hating  
everything you do to block him out,  
but just for now keeping his head down.

## DALLIANCES

Our nakedness and how easily we reached it,  
how we became so unashamed and careless

with each other—the habits cling to me now  
like the silk lining of a jacket.

The time you double-dog-dared me to go out  
bare-assed and fetch your bag from the car,

and I passed my neighbor's doors without  
even a glance at their curtains.

Or that June at the lake house, skinny-dipping  
out past the dock in broad daylight

while my folks, spent, dozed in lawn chairs.  
Why were they so delicious, all our titillating

dalliances with public indecency? Nothing  
appeared to be missing in the quieter moments:

smoking in winter, hunched under a blanket  
against the cold coming in through the screen,

your body beside me like an oven. Ah your body,  
how it filled my mind with its tang and musk,

strange places where hair grew, an ungainly way  
of stepping into a tub, elbows in my ribs.

My eyes formed a habit of undressing you.  
My hands hungered for yours.

When I came to your family's house in Decatur  
after we'd argued on the phone for a week

...

with a break-up hovering in the long pauses,  
and we ran in heedless of who was at home,  
  
stripping as we climbed the stairs—it's not  
making love I remember clearest  
  
but the morning after, how my left arm  
couldn't get comfortable whichever way I shifted,  
  
your eyelash shuddering on my cheek, and how  
you brought my free hand to your breast  
  
and then drifted back to sleep.  
What did I do to earn that moment, that trust?  
  
When we did break up at last, it was in bed.  
We lay naked a while longer, then rose  
  
and put on our clothes, still staring.

## TWO FLAMES

on *The Penitent Magdalen*,  
a painting by Georges de la Tour

The perspective is waist-level, seen from a bed—  
imagine a man waking there. Now imagine

you're the man: a whoremonger  
flicking fleas from the sheets. You see

her things strewn across the floor,  
and you would like to divine why she twines

her fingers and rests her hands, just so,  
on the skull. She's half-dressed,

half-hidden in the candlelight.  
Another light thrives in the mirror,

quickenes the fire with a twinning intensity,  
and back of that a shadow sharpens

to pitch. To say this candle thralls  
the eye, to call its flicker a fulcrum

on which everything drapes, somehow  
you must be escaping the mystery.

The spindles writhe. They seem, in this moment,  
to be wrestling for your imagination.

For second sight. But you're too poor  
in spirit, unconcerned with love or saints.

...

And while it's plain she's turning, like the flame,  
certainly away from you, you're baffled to guess  
  
toward what. Surely not the dark,  
the dark's caress, so unloving—  
  
which is to say, nothing?

•

The seduction is complete, the grace  
that offers no choice, no avoidance—in this way  
  
outstripping the libertine's glance.  
In truth, I wince to think I was ever so naive.  
  
To hold that gaze and be held by it. But then,  
what is grace if not a way of being seen?  
  
The savior's look, intrusive as a lover's,  
adores and dismisses. Adores.  
  
It has always had this secret power—light's  
collapse—but how naked I am now  
  
in the face of it. I've landed back in trouble.  
Darkness also burns. It shines  
  
with its particular blindness, concealing me  
in what is revealed. There is no mystery  
  
which mystery doesn't double.

FIVE

*Pearl*

## SOUTHERN CRESCENT

Fettered to earth, the train winds through  
the simple dark

of woods, past towns  
and rail yards. Everything stuffed

in the night's pockets turns to nothing  
in the window's glass.

No, not quite. Pitch  
black has that trick of reflection—it sings

how the body wants space, just enough  
to hold

one thought, but has only the cold  
exhaustion of being cramped, held in stillness.

My soul is a black star.  
O set me down

in pine woods, nowhere exactly: I will break  
from my bell. I am a crack

without a noise,  
a word without the power to create

or even bless.  
Mutter of the iron tracks,  
  
crows that flew  
cawing beyond the mirror's black —

I can't tell which  
but I'm hearing quiet voices.

## THE GUEST

Cold turquoise, a rumor of dawn.  
I shiver on the porch steps, drag long  
and hard on my smoke. I gave  
the bedroom a try but couldn't settle.  
In the living room, I thumbed through  
a photo album till I found you diving

off the Ocmulgee bridge, your body  
a perfect, curved machete of flesh  
scything the sky. Years later,  
the river shallow enough to wade,  
you carried me to a sandbar isle  
where I sat in reeds, cracking mussels.

The bed is too short. In the painting  
over the headboard, mynah birds  
stared at me, blank as scared children.  
So I came out here where I can hope  
something makes sense, where I can sort  
through the shells of my exile.

Father, why does growing up take  
such a little while? One day I read  
your gift, a dog-eared *Treasure Island*,  
the next your first letter. It skipped  
what would never be explained: a rift,  
a suicide, what happened. Now I have

many letters and all your tears—  
things have really been piling up.  
When I was six, telling a story  
in my perambulatory way, I wandered  
off the end of the dock and vanished  
through a longboat's rotted hull.

...

The sudden chill, the grasp of weeds  
at my feet, the choke of dirty water  
and its thrill in my throat. In that veil  
I see you diving still, searching  
me out and clutching my thin limbs,  
hauling me sputtering to the shore.

Nothing makes sense anymore—my life,  
your life, or this home where somehow  
I'm a guest. I don't know how to tell you  
any of this. Now I'm inside, now  
I'm listening by your door. Outside,  
the sky grows an impossible pearl.

## THREADY PULSE

The answer to the foremost question,  
the one on my mind for years, was how  
an industrial pallet-strap could bear  
a metric ton of weight but was thin enough  
to pass through the crack of a doorjamb.  
I wrapped it around a short two-by-four  
and hammered it secure with roofing nails.  
The board anchored the rope; the door frame  
would absorb the shock. I shut the door  
and locked it, then stood on a kitchen chair  
working out how to make the fastest noose.  
This was the summer of 2010. I was living  
in a duplex in Milledgeville, Georgia,  
just cut loose from my first teaching job  
after only a year. And deep in an affair.  
While the woman I really loved was far away,  
in grad school, and had no interest in me.  
Was this the nature of everything to come?  
I cleaned the house, bought the roofing nails.  
I can't say even now, three years gone,  
why I didn't kick that chair from under me.  
Hope? Cowardice? Or just an admission,  
somehow harder, I wasn't really so desperate?  
Once, my father asked why I always end up  
writing sad songs. "Life isn't a tragedy,"  
he told me, and I knew he'd fought through  
to that belief the hard way, after doing  
everything he could for his brother David,  
still not enough. Do we spend all our lives  
searching for a doorway out of our errors?  
The answer I found was a real door—  
I threw it open, and then it squared off  
the night and everything past my reach.

## BOOMERANG

As a child, how many things come back to you:  
the color of dusk, the dogs called home,

a boomerang to your hand. Like a bird to sky.  
It was enough then to sit and whittle wands

beneath a tree, the shadows of its leaves playing  
like shoaling fish. The rasp scribed the wood,

let loose bits of dust to the breeze. Under the knife,  
arrows took slender forms. Then one sped away

but stuck tall in tall grass, was recovered.  
You learned music, and how to write a song:

chords returned, refrains. If your muscles  
forgot a shape, there were other chances

to get it right, to strike the keys crisply.  
Then, a bit older, you began to fathom

the mysteries of work. One day, a spinning  
saw blade clutched for your hand.

When the surgeon freed it from the cast,  
it was stiff, as if turning to stone.

But with time, life came back to it: it was  
like a rescue from deep water, like plucking

the boomerang from the air. Another chance.  
How many are there? What are they worth?

Mice procreated in the walls.  
The house crumbled by splinters,

...

flecks of paint. Yet mirrors never gaped.  
Still you saw angelic geometry in paperclips

and said *let me* to your lover. You wove  
a prayer, wrapped yourself in it like myth:

*A pearl, make me a pearl.* You glimpsed  
a moth trapped behind a window screen once

as you hung up the phone. Not knowing  
it was the last talk you'd have with that friend,

you sat down to the organ, ran a scarred hand  
over the manuals, and began your ritual of practice.

Outside, leaves piled up in the firebreak.  
This morning it happened again: you woke up

from a dream of singing the loveliest song  
you've ever sang, a few words of it dangling

in the moment your eyes opened, then disappearing.  
A haunted silence: somehow, that's where you are.

Once, the words always came back to you.  
Like a stone to ground. But how young

you were then. Sun and shadow held you  
safe as a cradle, and if there was terror—

was there really ever terror? How far off  
it must have looked. High, small.

## LITANY OF WANT

*I want,* Rumi says. Like him, I also want  
a troublemaker for a lover, to be where  
her bare feet walk. But more than that,  
I want each morning chilly as I rise into it.  
Ablutions hot across my shoulders.  
For company while I write, an old dog,  
head on his paws and happy with scratches  
behind the ears. There are so many things  
I want. A breeze in the walnut trees  
and a cacophony of light, a salamander  
hiding in a heap of rubbish and leaves,  
squirrels raiding a bird feeder. Naturally  
I want Rumi himself, or Rilke, a paperback  
easing into my jacket pocket. I want to be  
four years old again, feel my father's hands  
large around my ribs as he lifts me  
to the monkey bars saying *Hold on,*  
*I'm letting go. Now swing to the next one.*  
Could time only spider itself like lightning  
so I'm all ages at once? Would I suffer  
a pang of deep longing for my first lover  
as we're locked? And just to understand  
my soul in the same instant it baffles me:  
this moment and that one, forever,  
I want them. But most of all, to know  
why I want. Somewhere far away someone  
is dying of want, nothing more than want,  
and I'm not that dying person. So where  
did I get such a sudden, strong want to live?  
I'm passing a playground where children  
squeal and chase each other down a slide.  
Again and again. They want nothing more,  
nothing but time. And I also, time:  
let me go to them, brimful of simple wants  
taken for whatever they're worth. Whispers.  
This isn't forever. Hold on, I'm letting go.

## NOTES ON THE POEMS

### ARS ORANDI

This poem is dedicated to my grandfather, Clifton Gaither.

### COMMUNION

I wrote the earliest drafts of this poem on the farm near Milledgeville, Georgia, where Flannery O'Connor lived and wrote for the last thirteen years of her life, after she was diagnosed with lupus. I had been told by Alice Friman that "Flannery still lives there." Alice was right.

### THE DEATH OF THE GRAPEVINE

This poem re-imagines the demise of the large, wondrous antique store on Hancock Street in Milledgeville during a storm in 2008.

### DUENDE

Aside from my own musical experiences, this poem owes inspiration to Tony Gatlif's film *Latcho Drom*, which documents the fascinating music of the Romani peoples, and Federico García Lorca's essay "Theory and Play of the Duende." The syntax nods to Faulkner's *Light in August*.

### LITANY OF WANT

This poem is dedicated to Elizabeth Blue and was inspired by her poem "A Lifetime," from which it borrows its opening idea, albeit refigured.

### ORCHARD

The conclusion owes a debt to the short story "In a Grove" by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa: "All was silent after that. No, I heard someone crying."

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CREEK

In addition to Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," this poem partly responds to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Waldeinsamkeit." However, the events were taken from life.

### SOUTHERN CRESCENT

I wrote this poem while traveling by train to Georgia, and though I didn't realize it at the time, it is indebted to Natasha Trethewey's "The Southern Crescent," from *Native Guard*.

THREADY PULSE

This poem is dedicated to Rebecca Norton.

TWO FLAMES

The painting is also called *The Magdalen with Two Flames*. Special thanks to Joshua Weiner and M. K. Foster for their thoughts on this poem.