

---

[All ETDs from UAB](#)

[UAB Theses & Dissertations](#)

---

2018

## Hands like Chains

Garrett Lee Odom

*University of Alabama at Birmingham*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/etd-collection>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Odom, Garrett Lee, "Hands like Chains" (2018). *All ETDs from UAB*. 2614.

<https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/etd-collection/2614>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

HANDS LIKE CHAINS

by

GARRETT LEE ODOM

ADAM VINES, COMMITTEE CHAIR  
JAMES BRAZIEL  
DR. WILLIAM HUTCHINGS

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2018



# HANDS LIKE CHAINS

GARRETT LEE ODOM

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

The poems in this thesis attempt to reach the universal in the specific, to find the common in the uncommon, the ubiquitous in idiosyncrasies. These poems often confront the spiritual within the physical, hopefully revealing a mysticism specific to each subject.

These poems, though not entirely evident in their subject matter, are influenced by Southern culture and life. Here, the Southern background of the writer becomes an undertone to the poems themselves, and whether the poem is set in the imagination of a painting or a back yard in Alabama, the language that brings these poems to life spawns from South.

Throughout the thesis, I mainly focus on ekphrasis, writing that is informed or inspired by art. I try to exploit the complex tensions that I find found between visual art and language, revealing the greater relationships between both mediums, between the means of communication that both mediums take, and the universality of the art and craft infused in both.

Overall, this collection of poems explores the things, the connections, the subtleties, that make us human, and throughout the collection, I hope to reach a more profound understanding.

Keywords: poetry, Alabama, South, southern, ekphrastic, hands

## DEDICATION

for my family

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my family, especially my parents, Kenneth and Shanda Odom, for their incredibly endless support.

Cheers to my friends for the good times, especially Scot Langland, for the beer, cheese, wine, and knit cardigan advice—thanks for being a good friend.

And with deep gratitude to my professors and mentors at UAB, tucked in their offices of the English Department, for their help and support. Especially: Dr. David Basilico, for his grammar lessons and opinions on many of these poems, and helping me understand the technical side of language; James Braziel, for telling me to keep writing; Dr. William Hutchings, for being a wellspring of literary knowledge; and Adam Vines, the arbiter of this thesis, for teaching, telling, joking, supporting, pushing me when I needed it, and encouraging me to push back.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
Hands .....	1
Ice Water Hamlet .....	2
Formula .....	3
Three Pieces Landscape .....	4
Ode to Country-Style Ham .....	5
When Winter Comes .....	6
The First Two Years .....	7
Whistle Come Cry .....	8
The Piano Player .....	9
Morning Mantra .....	10
Equitime .....	11
Swimming Hole at Dusk .....	12
Bird Watching .....	13
Chicken Parts .....	14
Morning, October .....	15
Dark Star .....	16

Big Gator .....	17
A Stone in the River .....	18
Transversal .....	19
Grace Panes .....	20
Seascaping a Dream.....	21
Four Years of Fall .....	22
Riddle .....	23
Crackerjack.....	24
Primitive Practices.....	25
Day Trip .....	26
Snowed In .....	27
The Other Side of the Lake.....	28



## Hands

Anthracite breathes  
the blue-flame words  
of my father  
when he asks *well if do*

A pig-iron ingot  
lengthens, becomes  
his arm, severs  
into quarters and bleeds.

Ink pools  
into my palm, spills  
through my fingers,  
my father now the crucible.

I answer, yes, I see God.

When I say nightmare,  
I think sea. I see a horizon reach  
and meet, tightening to a basin  
filled with silver.

My face breaks a surface  
that's sharp as ice,  
and I open my eyes  
to see eyes like mine,

green, clear, and swimming  
in the metal. When I wake,  
I wait for daylight's fingers  
to reach, for her lips

to part and whisper, *return again.*

Ice Water Hamlet

*after Moonlight in Virginia by George Inness, 1884*

Lay in this bitter light we have beside the kettle  
and find designs beyond our open panes:

a naval moon, dorsal of clouds and spines  
of awling stars, this myth of ours to wane

and ebb. I'll find a chisel, whittle out  
a face you'll never see, where even God's

bright fantasies will fail your curiosity  
and dreams of never trading gravity for time.

I'll take these palsied hours of night to shed  
the sight of you threatening your life

as if it were a thief, making every daydream  
seize for lack of reality, asking possibilities

to live beyond their lies. Rattling to  
your eyes, you tighten in the swollen skies.

Formula

*after the photograph* After a fire a sound of gentle blowing *by Laura Henkin, 2015*

I hear raccoons cackle  
far away and loblolly needles  
scratch the vinyl siding  
of our house, and I know  
night's got a two-fold hold  
on day, pulling it both down  
and away. When I look past  
County Road 144, I see  
Cripple Valley cradling  
the last ropes of light  
that pull at the sky's cheek.  
When I have time, I might cross over  
and down the valley, eyes of God  
going with me, night weighing up  
like chains.

## Three Pieces Landscape

*after* Streams, Mountains, Mist, and Trees *by* Wu Zhen, 1280-1354

### I.

A rasp of pastoral crinkling sounds  
in the crowns of trees. They might  
call this *tressage*, but we say trespassing:  
no sentiment can be woven  
to this place, no notion of “here”  
or “there,” no “come as you like,”  
no “pack it in, take it out.” We’ve come  
because we had no other choice.

### II.

I saw Wu Zhen when I had no  
other choice. When reason defeated,  
I trekked backward through his eyes.  
*Lent, un peu*, he cooed,  
*Peut-être nous pouvons nous arrêter ici un moment.*  
And I waited the hours he asked.  
I saw the gait of rivers, mist  
pendent in air. Leaves hinge their limbs.

### III.

The ink bleeds. We tarry against  
streams declining our grasp.  
The place hums, and we have no center,  
only to reach back and ask for antecedents.  
I loll in the foreground of an 800 y/o sketch  
because I have no other choice, no doubt  
but to come here without water or food.  
I have found no sense of silence.

## Ode to Country-Style Ham

The grease stings out  
of the browned skillet.  
Raw meat snaps  
fat spittle, cries,  
and Miss Joan  
raises her head high  
above the heat  
you take in,  
a few cuts of pork  
ribboned with  
pearly fat.  
You're drawing in  
by the minute,  
shrinking  
like half-brother  
bacon does.  
But you,  
circus-freaked,  
1/4-inch,  
unchunked cutting  
of salt-cured  
Southernality,  
flopped on a plate  
by the tong's  
waffled wings,  
breathe out  
a steamy smoke  
and smell  
before being  
swallowed up.

When Winter Comes

*after The White Duck by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, 1753*

You return, your shotgun broken  
across your arm, a white duck slung  
over your shoulder.

Inside, you hang it  
from the wall, a string around its foot  
hooked to a pin, its head and curling neck  
wound back into its breast.

Brushing the feathers  
with your thumb,  
you whisper something  
before you turn away.

I ask the pearlescent bird,  
*are you hungry?*

## The First Two Years

It didn't wake her  
when the sound  
drew him  
from the white  
sheets glassing  
from the streetlight.  
He toed  
to the kitchen,  
felt the grout  
coarse underfoot,  
smelled last night's  
burnt chicken.  
Outside,  
the '79 Vega,  
hubcaps walleyed,  
the Chevy badge  
flaring, centered  
like an iris—

his father's eyes  
shining,  
staring into steel  
under the press,  
slivering, smoke  
rising white  
into his face.

Then the sound again:  
scratching at brick,  
fractured pecks,  
a wing brushed against—  
a chimney swift  
for fall's first breed.

Whistle Come Cry

*after the Hiroshima Shadows, Ladder with Figure, unknown photographer*

His shadow outlines  
the clapboards, maps a mushroom  
head where he once stood:  
two feet planted, a humming  
above, calling—then nothing.



## The Piano Player

If two hands train-tunnel  
                                into notes,  
      jagging themselves  
          to replay over and over  
                                their litany,  
      and if the song rings true  
      with each new movement  
                                muscled into form,  
      staff lines leaning,  
then I might know  
          what these new words mean,  
          how they flit  
      beyond our periphery,  
          then turn and sound again.

Morning Mantra

*after* Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures) *by* David Hockney, 1972

From my view above,  
the water breaks  
your body into plates,  
turning in the pool's  
soft center.

When you surface,  
your spine cambers  
in the water's flash,  
the light shingling  
your skin.

When you swim,  
the wet rope  
of your hair  
washes in  
and out of time,  
and I hear  
the rushes cymbal  
on the hills,  
elephant ears tousle  
in a breeze.

I stare into  
the place  
you once were,  
waiting for you  
to surface again.

## Equitime

*after a photograph by Vivien Maier*

Over the heaps of broken bricks and trash,  
the glass eyes of another building's face  
watches—a thousand people sat behind  
the shadow of the wrecking ball's slow swing.  
A web of hoses helmed by several men  
spray down the shearing walls, the rubble piles,  
to overcome the dust. Five stories up,  
apartment rooms are opened like an egg,  
the center pouring out: the loveseat  
his wife bought skids and falls, grandma's piano  
bawls, and a set or two of china wracks  
and crashes on the ground. I stand across  
the street, beyond the caution lines, taking  
pictures, the record, something to remember  
them: a rocking chair my mother had,  
a white sheet windswept in the breeze,  
lampshades that never cease to hold their shape.

Swimming Hole at Dusk

*after At Warm Springs by Sally Mann, 1991*

You watch me  
    from the bank,  
        soaking in dusk,  
        camera in hand.

You say,  
    *pretend you're dreaming,*  
        so I wait and ache  
        to move, listening

to your shutter click  
    until you whisper,  
        *good.*  
    My body

lengthens  
    below the water's lips,  
        finally  
        letting go.

## Bird Watching

My finch trills, bends  
    its head to comb  
the matted feathers  
    in the morning sun  
while a lattice of light  
    stretches across the posters  
of Fringillidae families  
    and shelves topped  
with old cages—  
    sunflower shells  
dusted with bird shit.  
    The new cage sits  
in the sill, the window open  
    for him to see behind his bars.

    He pecks at the perch  
while a world  
    of Midwestern winds  
flies through elms  
    behind the rows of houses.

## Chicken Parts

*after the photograph by Frederick Sommer, 1939*

When you pluck out my layered feathers, shot  
pellets roll out. Still hot, you cut my parts:  
my working legs, wings wackadoo, the clucks  
I used to make full throated (and no fox  
to hunt me down). You tear away the sinew  
around my neck, voice box, while I break down  
to a baker's dozen stocks and bones, a litter  
of dishes: fried me, roasted me, me noodle soup.  
You lick your lips, ready to eat, and when  
you look at me, I'm just a pile of guts.  
Sometimes, you cook me with your oven eyes  
and seasoned breath like I was nothing more  
than prey, praying I go down easily.  
But when I was alive, I had much less to say.

Morning, October

We shiver on the living room floor.  
The quilt you made from  
high school band shirts swallows  
two Beaujolais bottles,  
our arms tight across your chest,  
your hair bridging my lips.  
I pull the quilt over you.  
*Don't touch me yet,*  
you say, and morning maps  
your shoulder blade,  
a collar of light hooking  
your neck, spooling  
on your ear's helix.  
I know when my fingers  
come to rest, the pulp  
of my thumb outlining  
that rim of light,  
everything I say  
will brush over you  
like smoke, that what  
I whisper now  
will never have been said at all.

Dark Star

*after Work by Kansuke Yamamoto, 1955*

Where we might converge  
in other ways, our bodies'  
hidden places bear

a dark star, their cloves  
of silver shadow turning  
amber in the light.



## Big Gator

*after the painting by Jimmy Lee Sudduth*

Jowls red red,  
                    white pegs for teeth,  
            eye a bullseye  
of cotton shot with a penny,  
            his scales polka dot  
            red white green,  
                    the endless spiral  
                            of a fingerprint.

This phony skunk  
                    part armadillo  
                    part seahorse  
                    part kite  
swirls in the cardboard  
            he found last night,  
big gator bubbling up  
                    there before his eyes.

## A Stone in the River

If we're woke by cords  
of sunlight  
warming  
our ears, little burrs  
of heat  
playing  
on our cheeks  
when the shadows  
gather  
and rest  
on the sill  
with all the strength  
of decaying  
wires,  
our fingertips  
finally meet  
hovering  
over your stomach.  
Last night  
we dug  
our fingers  
into the soil,  
a pass of your hand  
like casting a spell,  
and now, holding you  
is like holding  
a bowl of water,  
what anyone else  
would call  
a stone  
in the river,  
your tangled  
strings  
coursing in your sleep.

Transversal

*after Opustena by Franz Kline, 1956*

For all I've tried, for all the lines, blackened  
bars like a clique of beams, a darkened void,  
for every brush I draw across the canvas,  
I've come to her: pooled on the page, lines carved  
like melted poles, a wainscoting of ash,  
her bangs in trebles, body wanting blood.  
Distilled, a monochromed alone of pauses  
inky as pitch, I know she wants to speak.

*Because you pooled me to a puddle, tooled  
like wax and sunk in ink, I'm blind to all  
you see. You wrought the art of me, your hand  
crawling over all desire you've left.  
I'll wait come-think-it-over strokes, my page's  
pores, as a piece your heart has hungered out.*

Grace Panes

*after Room in New York by Edward Hopper, 1932*

It wasn't just that you'd double into that couch, plumed like a peony floret.  
And I can't say what it was in "it wasn't." I think I'd wait at the piano, then,  
imagining my fingers awling the keys. Any love comes to us unmade  
like we chose it, and I'm wracked against those broken things.  
Don't decide this hour, this slant of time, to leave again.  
Don't come slow to me. Don't let the window  
show me one thing then another.  
The swirled, darkened panes  
have my revival crazed  
in the waves, melting  
in every sunrise,  
sundown, ounce  
of heat, flush,  
and sear  
I see.

Seascaping a Dream

*after Hell Act by Luis Cruz Azaceta, 2009*

If this is what we've waited for, I'll take  
it back and break this passage over  
shallow shoals we left at home.  
In oceans circumflexed with foam,  
I rake the drink and move against  
the water's will. In this swill,  
my brother squirms in sawing tides.  
But if we make it past this pool, I'll cut my shame  
to shreds, build those shanties  
of sand, then dive into a wave to carve  
away what keeps us under loch and quay:  
I'll make our efforts effortless again.

Four Years of Fall

*after* Departure of Summer *by* Man Ray, 1914

What if we play the game we made, 'take back'  
or 'push-'em-shove-'em' in the field while biplanes  
over our heads heat up their cargo, gain  
payloads for coming war. This summer glasses  
and passes us: the days, like men, all soon  
to go, and we are on the precipice  
of slipping, without tools for patience, fists  
in spades, these instruments we're born to tune.

And after noon, with clouds that masticate  
our years, we try to dig a trench, our civil  
war on the grassy bald a play we wrote,  
the game of 'push-'em-shove-'em' faked to say,  
"we choked on what we made: a hundred fractals  
of history to rote and rote and rote."

## Riddle

I hear what you say  
to me, to the thrushes,  
the rain and cold,  
our boondocks  
swelled up with words.  
You sit on a stump  
and gut on about  
heat troubles,  
fish troubles,  
troubles in bed.  
We walk out  
away from the house,  
our breaths  
leading us, you  
telling me everything  
I didn't need to know,  
and as you peel open  
a pack of smokes,  
I want to say  
something back,  
but I only watch  
your lighter flare  
and, like this light  
you say love should be,  
suddenly go out.

Crackerjack

*after Livia by Frederick Sommer, 1948*

I've got no mind to fray  
    a yarn or trace  
a storyline after Arizona  
    begged me  
to belly in these scenes  
    of dirt and sand,  
the canyons raking down  
    our earth,  
the weathering of water.  
    We swirl in our  
little forgetfulness, the dregs  
    of another small  
town stupor and summer's  
    pressing heat.  
I keep against this paper-peel  
    scrap of door,  
staring at the face I can't mistake  
    and turn away,  
looming at turns of two identities  
    combined.  
Now, I think back to this day,  
    Prescott  
behind my play, either  
    phonebooked or  
buried, and I come steps away  
    from being renamed.

I'd rather forget it this way.



Primitive Practices

*after* Church—Sprott, Alabama *by* William Christenberry, 1971

Beside the church,  
I can almost see  
the congregation's cars  
mussing  
the church's acre  
before the bells  
rang, the service  
opening its doors,  
arms latching  
and unlatching.  
Inside, people  
must have laid down  
sins easy as rags  
and sang down  
the evening sun,  
cicadas' devil din,  
beneath a cross  
black as pitch.

These bodies  
are now bones,  
I guess,  
and everyday when  
I walk this road,  
the bells' clappers  
ache to swing.

## Day Trip

*"...the coming days will all be forgotten..." Ecc. 2:16*

We found termites  
in the porch,  
pits opening the wood  
to oxbows, a swale forming.  
The Tennessee Valley  
cracked open like a Bible,  
the wakes rolling,  
the furrows' backwash and foam.  
The bluffs partitioned us,  
the lake offering lessons  
in its mumblings  
like a voice in torsion  
hovering over the water.  
You missed the murder of crows  
lilting above then dividing,  
falling away to three, one,  
rain dusting the banks.  
The gutters weighed  
heavy with teaching.  
In the space between us,  
I searched for questions  
behind a foxglove head  
just blooming,  
the oak leaves opening  
to what I longed to see.  
Every seam at the water's edge  
closed, parting a moment  
before going back again.

## Snowed In

Outside my window,  
limbs double themselves  
under the weight.  
Car windows frost white.  
Snow steps off rooftops,  
splashing in the street.

Across the road,  
a man smokes alone.  
His body and shadow  
sinuate closer, apart,  
then not at all  
as he rocks in the cold.

Inside, my chicken broth  
simmers. Cut vegetables  
bloat with water.  
Hand-soap suds  
blister the scoured sink  
and burst on the drain's lips.

## The Other Side of the Lake

You're a sketch forming,  
coming into focus,  
an outline of another life I've missed.  
You stare into the water,  
and I imagine you mulling  
the leaves, changing hues,  
November just the hands of fall.

I wish I knew  
which memory changes  
your stance on the dock  
when you don't look back at me.

From my bank, my piece  
of the lake smooth before me,  
and you  
    your piece of property,  
something in your hand,  
perhaps a stone,  
one you never throw.

In our moment,  
you are your wife  
and children asleep  
in a room I know.  
You are your hands  
coarsed from wringing,  
your dog run out  
into the wing of night.

When I break from you  
and stare into the water,  
you are questions that return to me.  
Questions I cannot answer.  
You are my kneeling and standing,  
my hands on my hips or knees,  
my eyes cast over everything  
before falling, finally, on nothing.