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This thesis was written over the two years spent in the UNCG M.F.A. program. It deals with exploring different functions and maladies of the human body and giving those oddities voices. It searches out different perspectives in which the self is viewed. Elements of landscape and how important a sense of place, Louisiana specifically, are also investigated throughout this thesis.

CUT THE BODY LOOSE

by

Erin Barrilleaux

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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty
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I.

Voodoo

I make rules in this bayou,
drip my blood in a bucket
beside the door to keep animals
coming back for more.

Snakes slither the threshold,
I drape their bodies round my neck.
Their venom sweetens
my coffee. An alligator

offers his belly up
to my knife—quick kiss, slit,
add the teeth to my gris-gris.
Fat feeds the morning fire.

I salt the house's shadow
three times, pull jimson weed
up by its roots.
Heat softens the grass

as I conjure crawfish bubbling
in mud, suck their shells dry.
Bullfrogs dot roots
of cypress trees, croak

on my command. A full moon
rises from bayou smoke.
Spanish moss whispers chants—
I bottle them for my dead.

Sinkhole

The curtain of rain pulls back
and exposes a great throat,
a black hole between city blocks.
People gather. A barefoot girl shimmies
past hips, long dark hair threaded
down her back.

She wonders what shape her limbs
would take in the flailing motion of a fall.
Perhaps the *o* of fingers chasing toes,
somersaulting over and over, an infinity
of sorts. Or an *e*, as head and arms bend
back into the self, legs curved like a comma
to the body. If she could separate her head
from her neck, have it hover, just so,
to be an *i*—her own inertia, her own satellite.

Her braid dangles. She shuts her eyes,
and anticipates a funneling that will spit
her back into the earth.

Self-portrait as a Bird

Young, I once steadied
 my weight on an oak branch.
The breeze swooped under,
 curved back over to lift hair
like feathers on my outstretched
 arms. The boy did not fall into the sea.
His shed-self tumbled
 down as he ascended
into the sun. Through this gauze
 of clouds, land is a puzzle—
sharp-lined cutouts tucked together,
 or blocks children build
and break down. Just to feel my limbs
 unfold in the air, I jumped
from a schoolyard swing.
 Breath scooped out of my chest,
sky ripped blue and white above me.
 At this height, there are no birds.

The Bruise

At the moment of impact
I'm born, flushed red

and soft like the inside
of your cheek.

I evolve, aged in colors,
a weaving of misplaced

blood and tissue.
The inside of a painting—

rotted peach purple
blends with pupil black,

maturing blue like the lips
of dead bodies. Soon sallow-green,

my lifespan rides your pulse
like the crest of a dying wave.

A Brief History

I.

A lined scar marks
where my brother was cut
from my mother's belly.
His slick flesh
scab-colored and cold.

II.

My father fumbles
to catch me—
curious and waddling,
before the slap
of skin against pavement.
Too late, his fingers pick
bits of gravel
from my small
palms, knees.

III.

A breeze breaks the still,
spring air, lifts grass
flattened sticky
beneath our limbs.
We watch the moon
darken and scab over,
a passing eclipse.

IV.

Framed in the moving van
window, a man slumps
against a light post
trying to thumb a ride.
I grope for the radio.
His eyes—two scabs
search out my face.

V.
Turning to walk away,
your breath huffs
white clouds in the night.
I mean to ask you
to stay, but the words
harden in my mouth.

The Forgotten

The soft bog settles
and seeps up. Wind wafts
through willow trees,
catches the corner
of a checkered shirt peeking
through calla lily, cattails,
corkscrew rush. Fabric
frayed, threads float
and waver in the shallow.
Denim preserved in peat.
A beetle skitters, brushes
past bits of broken leaves
hovering above hands
and tangled hair. Gray-green
glimmers under ripples.
A sundew's stalked
gland snatches a fly,
the leaf folds, turns
to trap its prey.
Across the night,
the sparrow's whistle cuts.

Self-portrait with a Louisiana Mirliton

Two slow summers after mud
 soaked back in the Bermuda grass,
our backyard blossoms. Vines slink
 past the chain-linked gate. I flatten
my palms on the leaves, heart-
 shaped and so big I used to fan
myself like Cleopatra
 the fall grandma fell cold.
The fruit dangles like earrings.
 Its soft meat, wrapped
in the skin of an old woman, gives
 beneath my thumb pressed
on its green hip. I pick it—
 strip away the flesh
and plant its pit
 in mother's grave.
I wonder when the next
 rain with fall, run
my hands down
 my sides to feel the weight,
in the summers to come,
 my body will take.

Sisters

We peeled up the bottom
of our shirts when no one

was looking, pressed ears
to waning stomachs like seashells,

thinking we could seal
the gap in age
by bonding our bodies—

backs curled forward
and revealed the groves of ribs,

sucked in breath measured
the dip between hips,

elbows sharpened
into pointed arrows

when we huddled
in front of mirrors

calculating the distance emptied
between each thigh,

compared the way rings
slid off our fingers,

laughing at the slip
of them letting go.

Cystadenocarcinoma

She swallows the news whole.
Face ashen and sweating
under the office's fluorescent
lights, she twists in the seat.
Standing to leave, the diagnosis
crashes past the pit of her stomach,
takes root.

That night she dreams
of the darkness growing
in her ovaries. Feeling its weight
anchor her to the bedsheets,
she reaches inside herself,
snatches the two polyps.
Like musket balls, she hurls them
at the cloaked figure climbing
up the foot of her bed.

The Scab

I bloom upward,
a fusion of plasma
and platelets,
to repair the gap
where skin separates
and blood escapes
onto the surface.
Together we weave
a mesh until I'm ready
to secure my edges—
a helmet for the hard days
of healing. I survey
the work below.
Nerves scramble
to thread a new skin
as I crust over
itching rusted red,
a dried out kiss.

My Grandma's Fingers

Like caterpillars on snow,
they sink sigh-heavy
into the folds of her bed sheets.

**

She shaped the nails—
emery board like a violin bow,
playing a song of smooth edges.

**

A fingertip pulses, clamped
between the plastic reading
the skitters of her heartbeat.

**

Once she reached for a snowcone,
her five rings glinted in sun. She sipped
the syrup from the gemstones.

**

They glow even in this dim light,
withering gardenias, yellowed
and curling into themselves.

**

She balanced a bottle of polish, stroked
red lines from bed to tip, *A lady's nails
should never be naked.*

**

Seven days without water,
their skin dries out and ridges—
the bottoms of different oceans.

Self-portrait as a Hurricane

I used to twirl— arms lifted
to my shoulders, right foot
crossing the left,
till my skirt belled
over my legs,
and the ground fell away
from my tiptoes.

Outside on a dark day,
I perfected my dance.

My body called
for rain, the water slid
off my fingertips.

To keep glass
from shattering,
we duct taped X's
on windows.

Father hunched
at the sill as I tried on
new names—

Camille, Katrina,
inhaling the wind
sunk deep in my lungs,
my eye opening upwards.

Uprooting

Melons fat
on their vines.
Piercing the dirt
at my knees,
I watch him walk
back to his car.

My palm hits
a beet—purple skin
peeking through grit.
To get the roots,
I dig, push aside
soil our fingers weaved
together to pack shut
last September.

The earth gives.
I plan to plant
for next year's harvest.

Munch Paints *Amor and Psyche*

He composes the frame—
two lovers triangulated
in blank space. First,
smudged curves, captured aura
humming to touch each other.
Amor's back carved out,
he runs lines of persimmon
where light burns. Brush
bleeds darker, paint gives
the body weight. He digs
deep into the canvas,
strokes frenzied as the arm
aches to bend, curl around
Psyche's marble shoulders.
Moonstone softens
the bristles. Short, patient
lines fill in her shape—
a veil waiting for the reveal.

Ode to My Elbow

The way you bend—
 a fixed capsule,
hinges upper
 and lower parts
of my arm.
 I walk
my fingers
 across the crease
that cradles
 blue veins,
where you give
 beneath a needle
and offer blood
 to keep my health.
A pulse thrums—
 you protect the sign
of my life
 nestled safe
within nerves.
 O Ginglymus,
calcified knob
 of bone, heel
to the upper body.
 Your movement
is precise.
 Calculated angles
can embrace
 a weeping torso,
or jerk up
 and break
a nose.

Love Song

My city's night air caresses
like a saxophone,
sweat gathers
between swinging thighs,
rides a Zydeco rhythm.
My city burns into the night—
ferry boats and neon bar lights,
stumbles on Frenchman Street
to chase the dawn down.
My city's hangover is spicy,
coats the mouth
in gumbo and jambalaya,
whose voodoo you do,
a bayou's soft bottom sinking
back into the earth, boudin
and crawfish tails in its belly.
My city is painted paper-mâché
on wheels, flambeaux twirling fire.
Hammers and sawdust,
half-built houses and empty lots,
a water-line that fades
with every rising morning.
My city is Lazarus
without the religion.

II.

Self-portrait as a Specimen

I study its shivers—
 a butterfly pinned to the table,
its wings resist, instinctual
 to the rise and fall of flight.
Underneath my ribcage,
 a stasis shakes awake—
its beating timed to the flutter
 trapped in the frame.
I finger gossamer-wings
 growing stiff with rigor,
feel along the backs
 of my arms. The grooves
give under pressure.
 Colors compare—blue fades
to green, fades to yellow, fades.

Le Délire de Négation

Discovered in 1880 by Dr. Jules Cotard, symptoms include believing that one is dead, that organs or body parts are missing, that blood has been drained from the body.

--The Examiner

My hands are the first to go,
pins and needles at work
beneath the flesh. A cold
sets in I can't shake off.
I smell the ripening inside,
as my nose begins to cave—
a crumpled flower.
Each visit, his fingers
encircle my wrist to prove
a pulse still thrums.
But I know the movement
is just worms waiting
to work. My body
now their garden,
the tiny mouths chew
in and out. He takes
pictures of my insides.
Bones glow. A mirror
maps the ghost trapped
in this world.

Sister

March 22, 1990

I trace stars in my fogged breath
on the waiting room window
on this day you pass screaming
through my mother into this world.
I wonder about the terrible things
you must have done to her insides.

There's a gasp.

Expecting my father's bloody arms
or bits of body parts, I twirl around
and feel almost let down by his white
gloves, clean blue gown.

I follow him

down the hallway. Walk the tiled lines
like a tightrope to my mother's room.
Heels dug into the floor, I resist
my father's hand on my back
as he guides me across the doorway.
Propped on pillows, my mother sits
with her cheeks shiny. And stuck
in the crook of her elbow, you—
slick hair in spiral patterns,
your red face framed, eyes swollen
shut. I lean over the railing,
puff my chest up, reach
to pry open an eyelid,
to see what you saw.

The Cataract

I can't grasp corners—
every face a smeared
puddle. Clinging to the bottom
of the iris's skirt, I tangle between tan
and dark browns. Glimpses catch:
a leaf's jagged border, sinuous curve
of a peach. I'm thirsty for more.
While the old sleep, I squirm
up to the pupil to anchor
myself, spread my milky pools.

Now,

I drink in the full vision of myself —
a blue bloom in their reflection.

Munch's *Madonna*

On the studio floor,
they begin.

Her weight hovers,
and the colors build
from the bottom up.

Damp taupe, dim gray,
stretched and curled
to cradle the soft bulge
dipping at her belly's base.
The dark oils snake
each curve, slight bend
of back arched,
iridescent body twists
towards light, breasts bare—
swollen crescents.

Black strands
in frozen sway
frame a quiet face,
the center of a setting sun.

Man's Revenge

Hephaestus wields his hammer,
clangs it down until the anvil sparks
its hollow sound. The weight
of labor curls his spine—
a tulip wilted from shirking heat.
The forge erupts. He licks flames
that land on his face as crushed feet
keep him steady to craft gifts—
Athena's shield, Achilles' armor,
his wife's girdle peeled away
in Ares' hands. But tonight
it's clay his fingers mold and stress,
curves that sway beneath
the pressure of his palms.
Hephaestus, without rest, maneuvers
features: two smoldering eyes,
a nose, divided lips for smoke to rise
as breath. He tests the body newly born,
resists the urge to keep her.

Self-portrait in a Killing Jar

The fading light ferments
 this room and everything in it.
My reflection sinks,
 curves in the window
fogged from the heat
 dampening inside. My lid
screws tight, reminds me
 what lies past the glass is cold.
I break my bones
 to feel them heal,
study the splintering of a whole.
 My history written—a braille
to read beneath flesh,
 the calcified knots mark
where old gives way to new.

Elegy for Papa

I decided not to go to your funeral
because I saw your death months before
it happened. Your body grew backwards,
a documentary of decay I tried to rewind.

Because I saw your death months before,
I held a wake in my mind while the others
documented your decay. I remembered singing
to birds, your hand on my chest kept time to beating wings.

I retreated in my mind, while others wept
for your feet bloated like drowned bodies,
bones protruded your chest—the back of bird's wings.
The sigh of practiced limbs as we once danced,

my feet steady on yours . Like drowned bodies
we floated on the pool's surface one summer,
lost sight of the palm tree's shedding limbs.
The key is breathing you whispered before letting go.

Dried leaves floated on the pool's surface the summer
you first fell dark and misplaced our names.
The key is breathing I remember and let go
of your cracked hands, kissed your greased eyelids.

In the misplaced dark, refusing to name
what happened, your body stopped growing—
cold hands folded, eyes closed.
I regret not going to your funeral.

Big Easy Blue

A mug of chicory coffee,
its warmth like those summer nights
back home, the damp persisting,
cupped inside my palm.
Morning stretches out like a bridge.
The word *home* echoes off blank,
walls, a single lamp.
I feel its absence pitted in my gut.
By now, magnolias are in bloom,
buds peeking through waxed leaves
like beads after the last parade rolls.

Deconstructing the Day

Your lap cradles my head,
face bent so close to mine.
My throat itches to arrange
the syllables, combinations battle
to meet my lips. But your jabber
of différance runs on,
blurs past my batting eyelashes,
moistened mouth. A new dress wasted
because the moment broke
when I lost you to words. Naked
tree branches serrate the sky.
Watching a pile of dead leaves
interrupted by a breeze, I want
to raise Derrida from the dead—
bind his hands with a string
of symbols, seize his tongue,
stuff language down his throat.
Your voice turns off,
crackles like smothered fire.
I study the last bit of light.
My ears devour silence.

The Cold Sore

A gambler's itch, I creep beneath
the reddened flesh of your mouth.
Settle my roots wherever I please.
My blisters blossom— a small cluster
of translucent pearls. Swelling,
my fever thrives. One peaking burst,
and my life drains back into your body.
What's left is shriveled and scabbed,
reduced in an assemblage of flakes,
a metallic taste on your tongue.

Self-portrait in the Falling Snow

There were twigs— cracked
 ribs of the ground.
My fingers stretched over
 a sky muted
in the shimmering dusk,
 and there was your wet
tongue close to my ear.
 But still, I lost your voice
in the shuffle of wind
 and falling snow.
Cold, there was the cold.
 A welcome hand, crept
up under my coat, gave breath
 to my stifled chest.
I broke away to the white
 deepening at the pond's edge.
Eyelashes damp, heavy
 from flurry, I squinted
at the shapes beneath the ice,
 traced their movements
with my foot.
 The closing dark fell
in gusts. Your figure retreated
 back to the tree line.
In the static, my mouth opened—
 black as your footprints.

Munch's *Skrik*

tongue licks red—
a streak across
the sinking sky
 below

cerulean fjord
swirls returns
to swallow

a couple
at my back
their shadows
touch coolness
 reaches

a mounting
tornado of color
sucks and pulls

a weed twists to break
through sidewalk—
sound within my body

it swells inside
climbing up
to come out

cheeks curve
under hands
to hide it

pier beneath
my stumbling feet
 look over—

spill it into the sea
waves spit back
white foam

Vigilance

They say the toes curl under
a few days before the body dies,
a sign of the soul's slow departure—
a drawstring pulled, straddling
now and after.

 I paced,
watched for the warning:
ten snail shells beneath the sheet.

 That last night,
your vitals stable, I fell
back into the chair beside you,
but you didn't wait for me to wake.

To Katrina

Its guts torn out,
molding
on the front lawn,
my house
is a carcass
picked bone dry.

In the corner
of the living room,
my stomach turns.
Splashes echo
off concrete floor.

I thread myself
between studs
supporting a roof
caved in.

If only you
were blood and skin,
I'd pin you
beneath my heel,
slice your belly open,
poke around,
dig out
my mother's wedding dress,
father's collected records,
my porcelain dolls.

Self-portrait in Pieces

I pick the lock to a room
 that smells like rain
and damp earth—
 where your hands first ran
over the length of my body:
 a hip cresting, the slope
of my middle, my neck
 turned slight to fit
your palm.
 Another door opens—
cracks in the walkway.
 I pick apart my shoelaces,
erase any tracks. Dandelion clocks
 flood the yard— white waves
of air. In the overgrown flowerbeds,
 I give my knees
to the garden, plant
 my hair like moss.
I unscrew my own hands—
 twist at the wrists,
and bury them
 where our shapes indented
the grass. You sigh low
 on the sheets. I sink
further down,
 split open my skin
to spill between the weeds.

New Orleans Goodbye

Black parasols stitched in gold twirl
shadows on pavement. The lone
trombone wails the casket's arrival
as the slow shuffle shifts its weight
down the street toward the broken
landscape. Small prayer books closed,
they cut the body loose.

The tuba tornados its grunt
across the heat, thud on the drum
keeps the rhythm steady when the trumpet
bleats its torrent solo. Palpitating
between oaks, the second line grows,
handkerchiefs wave away the morning.