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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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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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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.



## 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.