

ABSTRACT

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 Caroline Randall, Master of Fine Arts, 2014

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Mass Density is a collection of poems arranged in pseudo-chronological order roughly determined by theme and date of composition. This collection confronts the ways memories effect and are intertwined in the present and future. The narrative is illustrated by recurring themes of family, genetics, romantic separation, and cultural gain.

MASS DENSITY

By

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Mass Density

This morning I saw that video
of the two-year-old being killed
in China. I don't know why
I watched it. Something drew me in
and I clicked play to see her totter
through an alley, running the way
little girls do with their arms out,
playing airplane, knees kicked high
in pink pants, dark cropped mane bouncing,
then she stops, balance wavers,
and with a head jerk to the left
she sees the truck that will consume her
but doesn't move in time and it doesn't stop,
strikes with its front wheel, pauses,
then lurches over with the back tires
while she lies, a dark mass, and for a moment
I can't think of anything but
the query of how a body the size
of my niece who I can spin
on my hip with one arm, and whose lips
are as small and red as freshly plucked
pomegranate seeds, her round belly
barely the width of my thigh,
and the length of her
that fits in the dog's bed when we're
not looking, could bounce a delivery truck
hard enough the driver needs
to clutch the steering wheel
as his own leverage in the seat, and
she stays there, the surveillance camera
pans time, light changes, dozens
walk by, their figures blur
like a mist as she is a focused
black hole, worlds moving
around in the dim orange light
not wanting to be sucked in, coming close,
but never touching until someone
bends over and grabs under
her arms, drags her to the margin
leaving a puddle and trail
like leaking rubbish, and then
she's dropped, left *again* to spill
around herself until
a woman walks up, looks around

the way you do when you find
a dollar on the ground,
scoops her into her body and runs
out of the screen. It's me
that carries her and I can't
look away from her
bruised face as we wait
at some hospital while I wish
I could press myself through her pores
and give because that's something
that can't be unwatched.

Crude Genetics

Everyone knows monarch butterflies migrate
but everyone doesn't know the fourth generation
is the only one to do it because the preceding
three generations die six weeks after birth
from their thatched cocoons, starched, craving nectar,
feeding, then reproducing, continuing the cycle
until that golden generation blossoms,
all butter and honey and black-veined bodies
ready to cross the Mason Dixon to hibernate.
How can they travel 2,500 miles
on wings so thin? I saw one's flick
in my uncle's cassette case I kept it in
thinking it had come back to life only to see
the air conditioner did it and I cried
but what really upsets me
is the first three generations' short work
of storing up, changing, finding a mate,
only to be the parent of a child to die early too, that is
until the wave of strength genetically erupts,
or maybe it's chance, the scientists wrong,
but still, they must feel their work is in vain,
and don't tell me what I already know—
bugs don't think as such, and trying to figure fate is futile—
because I don't care. I can't help picture
that one mother readying her body and fiber sack,
stuffing her vanilla bean belly full of clover
only to see her son, for now a creamy egg
padded to the meat of a milkweed leaf,
off to the same idle fate, her dark and tender face
turned down, eyes wet, wrapped in her
tawny shawl, rocking in her seat, hoping
her son doesn't feel that brutal pull
and turns out different, doesn't make the same mistakes,
stays safe, finishes school, marries right,
stops stealing pills, but she can't help know
he ends up just like his father, laid up
in a hospital bed after having his third coronary,
his body spoiling around what he keeps putting in it,
mouth cracking, skin thin and yellowing,
the lucid tissue of his hands sinking
around his darkened veins as he points a purpled nail
at the nurse again, treating her so badly
she has a milk of magnesia mustache
and shaky hands with the IV needle but maybe,

just maybe, those statistics are wrong.

On Coming to Terms With a Genetic Tremor

On my way out
 I check my hair
and see
 I've splattered
 something— coffee
maybe juice
 down the front
of my crisp, clean
 shirt. I hang my head
 to see the stain's
end at the loops
 of my pants.
 Fumbling the cream
 button of my top,
I'm frustrated and overcome
 with the rattle
 of my fingernails
against the plastic,
 now knowing I will
surely need
 sippy cups and smooth
 spoons eventually
 just like
my father.

All the Girls Awake on Easter Day

We're two months
 away from another start,
Erin's belly inside
 bubbles boy,
but outside here Mom
 wipes the counter
and the dog shits
 the floor and the brain
and heart sleep long till
 a kick or turn and move
to float right, but you're baby queen
 of the backyard,
Godzilla of the spice
 planters and Oh! What fun
you're clapping flowers, sun
 squinting those cat eyes, a stain
an your church dress,
 gold bracelet, baby teeth
and you know nothing about Easter
 yet except *Eggs!* but you're our one death
one life and you look just like her,
 Granny died an hour after your birth
thinking you were named after her
 so here's to hoping
the new baby boy falls
 far from my tree

Make the Mound

Sticky knees, the sharp smell of
ant bed killer, spilled sodas,
thick bubble gum breath
huffing uphill, hardly quiet,
startling the souls of the Cherokee.

You and the biggest boy
got to the top last,
forced to kiss the floor then
kiss each others' chalky
lips while your classmates cackled,
clapping clammy hands, and

earlier today Mother took out
stitches, the seams spreading
in your yellow day dress,
body hanging heavy,
buds bare in the thin-thread warmth.

Lessons From Losers

The fragrance of magnolia mixed with Church's Chicken one block over when a breeze brought something new through the curtain of glossed leaves in the warm, worn crook where I perched sometimes, scratching shapes into bark after school when nobody good could watch me. Mom was at her school trudging through calculus and bio-chem with Maurice and Leon who would sometimes babysit and amaze me with tricks from Jamaica— teaching my math tables by passing soccer balls between their foreheads hundreds of times, chanting twos and fours or how to speak sing-song while bouncing me on their shoulders on the college lawn. I thought it was *so coolio*, but only a little less coolio than how Vladimir and Tatiana would play-compete to spin the most in pirouettes or tape-measure height and range of their strong, clean-legged leaps. Their daughter, Ana, showed me how to be beautiful with the smear of foreign honeys and nail rouge, how to crush blackheads and the tilt of the head found *most attractive* that I later tried on her brother, Giorgi, 11 years my senior.

I liked him and the air on his motorcycle he let me steer, secretly, folded in front of him, wearing his helmet while his parents were at practice and mine getting better but he had no clue what was happening in most of his implant life from the Soviet Union to Jackson, Mississippi. We sat side-by-side, our knees like knuckles as we leaned over a coffee table in playroom communion reading with kid books or sports magazines, both stumbling over *answer* or *paradise*. But sometimes I'd scream words in Russian during pre-school like calling my uncle a shit-head when he'd creep from his cyst of a room beneath the film of bitter smoke and dark. Below my magnolia tree at my grandmother's, holding a pack of rolling paper and the collar to his dry-skinned dog, he'd ask which losers were too busy today and tell me that probably made me a little loser too.

Thunder

That day the devil was beating his wife, the sun shown as it all poured down, and we were driving through the golden rain to lunch by the railroad tracks.

Mom had been busy with school and dad gone for work, but today we were together and we just were.

I looked out the car window covered in stickers and finger smudges and saw a moment I've never forgotten—a little girl, younger than me, probably four

or five marching on the front porch of her tattered white house in panties and yellow rain boots, shooting an umbrella into the air with each step.

An older boy, I assumed was her brother, crept across the yard shirtless on an old dirt bike, the rain wet on his tan shoulders, the day becoming a hot yellow mist.

I remember this from years passed, days after my three-year old niece fell from my sister's arms face-first into the stairs.

The blood and drool spilled from her gashed lips and she wept for hours, then, to the hospital, back home, the next day, and now.

Hours before she had been marching in the backyard whacking the ground with a thin stick with each step while her little brother played in the red mulch.

It never rained that day but the look on my sister's face after it happened was like thunder.

The Weight

I didn't understand then that we would never be the same again—my father moving to Gulfport to work for his father because we went bankrupt in the oil business—a handsome, licensed lawyer doing lumber yard work with the possibly high-school-educated employees. When I would visit he would walk me through the yard and let me mark poles with a light blue piece of chalk—the stacks and stacks of treated wood to be shipped across the southeast—you could pick them out anywhere, they were the only ones that were tinged green—and he let me wear one of his leather gloves, stiff with dried sweat, so I wouldn't get a splinter.

Later, we slept on the floor of the two-roomed house he rented directly next to the railroad tracks. He had a portrait of my mother and sister that Uncle Patrick had done, but he didn't have time to draw me so I put a self-portrait from Mrs. Smith's class propped against the white wall near the head of his sleeping bag. The next morning he let me place shining quarters on the tracks. When I picked up the few I could find after the search, they were warm in my palm like the muddy stones I plucked from the bed of the bayou in summer, before I knew the weight of living.

Our Tatiana

She was the girl among pointe shoes
and cobwebs of pink chiffon—
but the slice of breast tugging
at the threads of chest muscle
unstitched each pendulum,
honeydew white, supple dove,
dreams thought crushed by the fact
her tits were too damn big.

I don't remember her face,
only the lace of veins
and doctor's green marker
she showed us while babysitting,
a quiver rippling from nipple
to ribs and I thought

they were beautiful
garlands adorning the volume
of her wingspan,
arms stretched, poised
in the back, waiting her moment
to leap forth, a froth in tulle,
furious in her turns

and the sound of each sip
of breath as she spins
in the spotlight
her skin a silver mercury glass,
her soul a fresh spring
bubbling, stirring the surface.

Dredges

While greasing through the glut
of Skymall and trying to hide my headphones
from the bouffant sunburned stewardess,
the boy patted my forearm and body-offered
a Cert before take-off—mouth shut, okay face,
Bible book in his other hand. I tokened southern pleasantries
then watched his split mouth, tongue murmur and cleft click
over the wide river of hurt running gum to palate,
metal moving bone, teeth into new proper places.
I tried for a nap but mainly wondered what happened,
what it felt like to run a spongy tongue between the cavern
of healing skin, I imagine firm, pink, and white like strawberry hollows
and what noise echoed through his ears
when the roof of his mouth split wide—
a pop like the chop of backyard oak
in the still heat of afterstorm? Or the slurp and wet draft
sounds of the mouths of my parents when they started kissing again
in the closed garage, mom leaned
into the car's open window wearing an oversized robe,
balanced on her tiptoes, round bottom, wet hair, and my dad
leaving for Gulfport or El Paso or somewhere someone
wanted the salts of the earth from a new piece of land mined
in the hopes for more than what it offered in the first place.

You Always Wore Your Flaws

There were no flames
in the fire place behind
me, my body
ran warm with gin
as I sat pigeon-toed
on the hearth watching
my family scurry
around the den.
You used to wear
your flaws upon
your sleeve, entering
rehab at 75,
a successful, incredibly
respected orthopedic surgeon,
elder at church, good
shot, founder
of a day-school, you admitted
you were blurred
from the vision
of outsiders, a different
man than expected, except
his family, this family
that pours black tea
into a silver set
at ten point two one five one
Thanksgiving Night.
You were in the bed, still.
No longer her amour,
my grandmother lying
next to you, mind absent,
hands open like the eyes
of fish—sterile, senseless.
My father threw away
all the Thanksgiving food
when we got home. I lay
on my twin bed
spinning a bit
but mainly masking
my emotions for being
very drunk the night
you passed, very
embarrassed—
and steeped
in sadness.

Popsicles

Even the frosted tongues
of pink popsicles
in the industrial freezer
of my grandparents' home

bled red into my mouth
just as the blood and spit
ran from my lips
onto the brick floor

beneath the pool table
after my cousin popped
my face for no reason,
but I hid

on top of the cool floor
and waited for someone
to notice I wasn't around
and I'd wait for hours

staring at the trophy collection
on the piano, the curve
of each golden body elongated
and frozen in motion,

huddled together
touching knees and hands
and they watched over
my shifting shadow of a form

as I counted as high as I could
and scratched the sandy grout
between the bricks, my nose running
from crying, only to be found

much later in the closet
with my hand stuck deep
within the freezer, stealing popsicles
and humming my own name.

First Note to My Sister, Third Pregnancy

I want to teach her our prayer, the one
we say before we sleep, its words undone

in simple ways like “everyone that’s well to be well,
that’s sick to be well, feels bad to feel good.” I’ll tell

her soon to teach her sister, now a bud
who’s spreading burrowed deep inside the rudd

of your unyielding belly, say it how
we have since we were too small to reach the boughs

of faucets. And I want for her to be
the one to teach her sister how to read

the way you did for me in summer sprawled
across the cold stone floor of Granny’s hall

you circling with your fingers till they smeared
the Bible words “REJOICE!” “HE WEPT.” You cheered

and knew that everyone at school would be
as proud. And for the one that’s yet to be

I hope she’s just as pretty as the first, with lips
that same and simple red, and last I want

to tell her, let the littlest sleep in bed,
feet tangled, tethered in the cold like ships.

The Technicolor Monks

They didn't plan on seeing what they saw,
the mummified monks suspended in prayer
against some foreign monastery wall
now photographed and color stained by an artist
I met at an outdoor market somewhere in Tennessee
who kept a ball of paper in an empty tooth hole,
but they're pinned to my bathroom wall,
each rubbed a beautiful shade
of something—ocean green, sunburst orange,
neon pink, delicate lilac,
but their heads lax, vents of mouth holes sharp and skin
stretched tight over skulls or caking off of brittle bones—
and each of the five stances looks as if they're frozen in the middle
of a carefree dance, arms curved to crescents or feet splayed wide,
knock-kneed, hips kicked to the side—
and I feel a little bit guilty that they've seen
fogged views of me naked and heavy from a bath,
perfume bottles askew after deciding which to wear
to a skuzzy bar, lipstick smudge, tangle of gold necklaces,
empty toilet paper rolls, a last minute bikini wax,
and later the back of my boyfriend
as we press against the sink.
I should take them down
or put them in some other room, but
what's the point? They'll always watch
what they shouldn't have ever done.

The Pearl

Ten girls stand burn-bronzed buck-naked backing
ankle-deep in a dirty-ass river. Each presses one arm
wrapping two breasts, the other hand a spade over the mayonnaise white
under swim bottoms tossed in dirty, neon piles with tangled strings,
all inside-out on the brown sand before they fled to the water
already swimming in the squint-eyed, smear-gold fury
of their own day-drunk that set swirl at 11 am during a brunch
of club sandwiches and eggs benedict on their parents' tabs
after tipping the help under the table to Styrofoam cup
some beers and airplane whiskey to drink then take
from the Country Club of Jackson zooming through the woods
on Yamahas gifted 6 months earlier
to the sludge-thick, sick-silt Pearl River bed
swelling 3 miles from anybody who gave a damn about kids
who whipped too quick around corners or tried tricks
while stacked by threes on the backs of boys
feeling big behind the wheel of a 10-thousand-dollar toy fancied
to chase deer, but today they spin girls and get stuck
in mud so deep it sucks like quicksand and tumps
a flailing load of teens on top of each other just so
it scares them but doesn't harm as they slap into the mess,
laughing too hard to tell if someone's really torn, only to clamber on
grabbing backs and belt loops, saddled slipping in the mix
of sweat, gritty mud and spilled beer, legs dangling, someone's lost
a shoe or sunglasses, and head for the smutty water
they set out for hours ago.

Boys stand shirtless in khaki shorts, wiping their eyes
with dirty polos and tossing Bud Heavy cans
to eager hands while the girls wait to free fall
a few feet into the cold, deep part they planned on the count of three
as their thick-braid silver and gemstone jewelry glints
the only colors besides that dumb, dirt-brown caked in their hair,
painted on arms and smooth legs and everything is so the same
they need not cover much then cry as they fold into the chill.
Underwater—just black and the froth sound. Bodies float
below the water line, skinny limbs dart and swipe like eels
as they cleanse with bracelet-clink flicking water
while wiping each others' faces to white
then bob, weave and linger against the opaque cover of the backdrop
of a carved-clay cliff—red as sunburn and raw like beaten skin—
littered with crusty towels and sun-bleached beer bottles from this
or some summer years ago when people now their parents' age
came to get drunk and make stupid just to forget

what it was that made them never want to stand
and walk up the soft, dank, Mississippi dregs.

Natural History

The purple lariat scar down the neck
of the curator at the Smithsonian,

the one she tried covering
with a puka necklace and ladybug scarf,

the one rippling in plum waves
from the breadth of her collar bones

to the cream plane of breastbone. It was
the round bruised shine of a slippery earth worm

slicking down the cleave of a peach,
burrowing tip-first in the soft spot

of a bruise, and ending somewhere
beneath her starched navy blazer.

I want to trace it with two fingers thinking
that's one hell of a beauty mark.

Let me take you behind the Native American
diorama, maybe under the teepee so no peeking,

or in the shadow of the strong horse.
Uncurl the silk, let the puka crack against the floor,

I want the scar to rift your soft pillow of stomach,
let it end in the open mouth of your conch shell.

Now, reader, picture a pretty girl—
that one whose heart you broke:

This is a love letter to her.

PseudoSonnet

Your rusted Chevy at the lemon lot heart.
Your dent in a can of discount black eyed peas,
one hell of a mess on aisle 5 at Wal-Mart,
dusty gnawed-up mutt chewing fleas
dragging its crippled leg below the bridge
of a heart. Your shower clog, Davie pissed
the couch again heart. Your crusty fridge
and empty bottles, clenched and swollen fist,
that soggy hammock, sticky bar stool heart.
Your momma's boy, black sheep, knew better,
just say you didn't screw her heart. A part
is good, a hand holding, writing letter
kind of heart, dancing to Elvis' "Blue
Suede Shoes." Now *that* part is worthy of a me-and-you.

Second Note to My Sister

We have faces made for smiling, but I was weeping
and you made sure he paid for it. You put me

on your hip and carried me back to their house
two doors down where he had slapped me in the face

for winning and now I see it—my legs dangling down your legs,
you marching knobby knees with one arm around my hip,

the other clutching the soft of my reddening skin:
a baby carrying a baby to tell a boy not

to hit girls, and never to touch me again.
Another twenty years and you made someone else

learn. I could believe it:
you grabbed my hand and pulled me into you

so that our beaded party dresses clinked as you told him
in your stringent way to forever fuck off.

I know you and you know me and now
we'll make a deal. Let me try to take

care of you. Your husband told you he'd leave you
with nothing if what he felt was true—the hidden calls,

emails, and messages you swore were nothing.
But I'll lie for you. I'll play dumb in the mess

that you dug. Your secret lover first was mine, but I owe you.
And I owe you more than that.

Kudzu

I've always known about kudzu:
it grows a foot a day, wasn't born here, but ripped from Japan
and flourishes better in its adopted habitat—
just the trivia and farmer facts about that sheath of green
consistent and hungry enough to envelop a house
within a week with its tear-shaped leaves, but I've only seen
the before and after—a rusty car waits in a backyard
on cinderblocks a few feet from the first leaf of the path
of a dark canopy with swells and lumps like polyps
and ligaments beneath the green as if it's hell-bent
on taking the sky down, too, and then

the car is gone, swallowed in the roll
of the wave, pulled into the undertow, recycled, maybe,
to its strength or clumped in its belly and the kudzu
is everything in a green cavern that starts nowhere
and doesn't end when you say so.
I've always wanted to watch it
or feel it for a full day as I lie on its edge
and let it snake slow across my legs
and tangle through my hair then push
down the river of my mouth stuffing and folding
its leaves within me and I wonder would I panic

—just the way I did when you joke-tackled me
during rough house in the graveyard
in college when we were all high from sweet alcohol
and bad dance music and went to sacrifice a few things to Faulkner
—a half bottle of rye whiskey poured on the headstone
and one pearl earring planted beneath the pens—
you grabbed me and pushed me under your fall,
my arms cinched to the damp ground, my hair caught
in your jacket zipper and it felt a quick, heavy, strangle,
dark and I pulled one shallow breath into my chest pressed,
your weight like hot water, your hand gripping my throat
and I felt my necklace press from the inside of your hand
into my skin and you pushed a hard kiss into my mouth, long
and the bitter ring in my ears till you laughed and rolled to the right
and I breathed loud—

or would I take it smooth and calm
inviting the woolly relief of sleep till I went to swim
to see what happens to the things that die
beneath its force in the smothering dark of its weight

where it makes night and puts it all to sleep.

What I Don't Tell You

It was all intentional. My cousin and I
stood on the front porch and waited
till the cars passed and we were alone
in the balm of Gulfport air, our tongues thick
from bottled root beer and peanuts and our eyes met
and we said 'let's do it,' then reached our bare
forearms over the brick ledge of a windowsill
and swiped the tanned skin of ourselves across it
hoping to draw blood, to scrape skin from skin
and bleed enough we'd need colorful Band-Aids
and attention. We tried and tried, only to draw chalky marks
that turned red against the tear of ruddy, rough stone.
We failed. Someone said if all I did was look back
I'd drive myself insane

 but remembering that day,
clear and warm, our lives seeming nothing more
than running through the grass and toilet-papering
bayberry trees after catching black tadpoles
in the bayou, makes me sad, makes me think
that twenty years later I'd try the same thing
after getting in a fight with you—
but this time I didn't fail, and hid it
so there'd be no questions and no regard
just me staring at myself hoping
that even as a child these little things
don't define us.

Allegiance

I'm sitting on my back patio
idly sucking the meat of the cold sugar cane
I bought at the "Social Safeway" calloused
between two pieces of green,
crunching down with the same mouth
that misses the sing-song name of Mississippi
and I realize I'm tired of feeling fucking crazy
with my booze-induced anxiety
ringing its tired bell every and all Sunday. It's Monday
and I'm exhausted.
So here's to finishing this stalk
in peace and not thinking about what
might've happened during my blackout
or whether I used a condom because today is pretty
and this tastes good, so I'll
lace up my bruised jogggers
to take the concrete of the city
I can't wait to rip off and leave
like a soaked Band-Aid
because this is what my father did
when he wanted to drink and
drink some more but instead
he'd come back all bronze-bold and wet
and I'd imagine where all he'd been
those three hours as I waited
at the front driveway
wearing bathing suit bottoms
under my overalls, sitting
crisscross applesauce,
while I finger-dug for arrowheads and wished
the four-wheelers worked but mainly
missing the shirtless man all the Jackson ladies
called "Handsome Jeffe" under mouth-whisper
because they didn't see him stumble around
in a Ralph Lauren terrycloth robe
or gurgle-sing Elvis after 5
or kick the empty cans to find socks
beneath his shoe shelves—
they saw the slick-backed black hair,
expensive car, and beautiful suits
and now I realize I'm just stalling my run so
here's to treatment, and the time
he checked himself out
because he "missed us" too much,

and the time he went back in, and
the thick-sugar sheet cake we brought him
on his birthday, and the nurse
who checked my tiny pockets,
and the dinky banner I made him
when he came home because I pledge
allegiance to my dad for teaching me all he had.

Discovery

I used to dig for arrowheads and treasure
Indian head nickels I bought for twenty
times the price at the flea market on Saturdays
with vintage, bulbous perfume bottles and chenille
robes, but more than that I loved the thick mounds
on the way to the catfish place in Flora—
one after the other and the silhouette
of a giant lying beneath the earth—
I wanted to do more than climb its face;
I wanted to kneel and scoop my hands
into the damp soil, slide straight
into it, elbows deep to reach a beaded
necklace or pot chalky from fire, and further
for the smooth bone hairpipe of breastplate,
I wanted my whole body submerged, in the dark,
no light, just me and the Cherokee, still fresh, intact,
still, them face up and me kissing on my way
down because God knows it's against Him
to do that and all the other things.

Love Dreams of Rico the Zombie Boy

At the end of every weekend you ask
into the phone in your sing-song way
Did you kiss any boys? The baby screams
for you to hand her toys or crackers while I
make up a story that always sounds a bit
the same, plan them out like a task—
Oh, no, but I met one of Louis' friends,
he's pretty cute, works at a bank or something—
because if I told you who I've been
having bawdy dreams about at night
you'd gasp and tell me I need therapy
or pull the baby-card and say I can't spend

time with her if I say things like that.
But part of me thinks behind the receiver
and wooly static your face would look just like
our mom's when I told her I started my period.
Embarrassed, scared, and happy, clutching tissues.
And probably a little jealous at
the fact that I was 13 and just now growing
into someone I might be, all braces,
skinny legs, and glitter.

After my made-up story, I hear your hands slosh
the dishwater or you scream at the dog
and tell me you'll call me later. Knowing
you're off to tend to your house and family,
dice the cold tomatoes, heat the skillet,
bounce the baby, vomit from the new life
that's growing inside of you, I go read
and ready myself for sleep, wondering
if I'll dream of him again tonight—hopefully
you read this at some point and know
I'm just the freak you want to be.

Comfort

One of my last memories of my grandmother
was me helping do her hair for the day—
brush her white-blonde strands
then clamp them with a 1980's hot curler—
it was a strange feeling,
helping this woman who had done everything
for me, and it was a different closeness
that felt foreign and uncomfortable
because she was incapable. Having my hands
work through her soft hair, I could smell
the familiar perfumed lipstick
and I don't think I'd ever
really touched her hair before
but I was helping and that
was enough just like the other day
when you asked if I would rub your head
that was aching from the chemo
you'd been receiving—
the nurse called it "the blood of Jesus"
and "the red devil" as she placed the IV
into the port in your chest—bright red liquid
hanging above your head dripping slowly
while we chatted and waited for you
to have to go to the bathroom, which would be red
from the medicine, and waiting
for all the bags to course through for hours
until we arrived home and you asked
for something, something I'd done before
because you've always had migraines,
but today it was different—I held your bald head
between both hands and looked
at the sparse white hairs left at the back
near your neck and began to rub
while you closed your eyes
and rested and it was something small
I could do, but your aging
hasn't been with grace
like Granny's, but with force—
a quick turn to grey skin and thin face
from thriving and fit.
If all I could provide for you
and her was a simple task,
quiet the distressed feeling
of being very needed by someone

I had needed.

For my Judge and Jury

Your fingertips on my back
before a foreign bath time
were the silk streams of sugar
poured into thick black coffees
we didn't drink, steaming
in mugs, dense and beige,
at the motel diner where we killed time
alone, made faces with bacon,
drank cold chocolate milks,
napkins scratchy, crayon nuggets gnawed,
and the waitress blew smoke
behind troughs of eggs.

Later your comb and small hands—
not much bigger than my own—
smoothed through
my wet hair like threads
of baby powder and smelled
of the cheap hand soap you lathered onto me—
belly navy bean white and face blotched
with ketchup, fingers syrup thick.

You wrapped me in a thin towel
and let me sit on the toilet top
as you bathed yourself
and shaved the blonde fuzz
from your legs with mom's razor.

Then under the covers
our feet tangled heavy waiting
for our parents to finally come home,
those we readied for.

Apples

My mother tells me I'll never have it
as hard as she did, and she never as bad
as her mother who lost four beautiful brothers
by 26, pregnant in medical school, then divorced
at 27. Something went terribly wrong in Mom's
childhood but wasn't it worse than that?
She said she was locked in closets
and smacked in the head, but truly I don't want to know,
I don't want to picture her black pixie cut bloodied
to a smooth jaw, or her milky body broken
by something sinister, maybe sexual,
so I don't. I just don't know.
And the memories of my childhood
with immature parents pales by comparison
to my family's women, but
what about that time I was alone, as usual,
in the front yard of my grandparents Gulfport home
climbing a pecan tree or hiding under
that one random clump of Japanese bushes,
I palmed my stolen apple from my mouth
to before my eyes, terrified and excited
to see the crisp, white meat
smeared for the first time
with the sour iron of fresh blood
and the hole where my baby tooth
once was, the soft, stringy pit left bleeding
a clot red-orange as I took another bite,
pain piercing blocking out everything
else and telling me I must be brighter
inside, and I knew then, like now,
I'd surely swallowed the hardest
part of myself.

First the Palms

And this is the way she wanted to see herself—
Indian style on an iron chair
capped with a Moroccan pillow,
citrine tassels and the salty wind
pulling between her and the man
with eyes a bitter shade of brown
and mouth a pillow below the saffron plums
of his cardamom cheeks, plump filets
laid across a smooth grained slab of wood
slicked with the light of summer.
She leaned forward, chest resting
on the table while she tongued the broken orange
he split on the purple plate—

First the palms, her Mississippi mind
saw them as five digits
flitting a *glad to see ya*
as shadows flamed
then licked across the tables.

Then, the ocean she caught sight
of at the end of Main Street,
a glow that pushed a wave through
her heart as it sprawled across the sand—

a cup of cold tea blotted sepia stains
into the white napkin
like forgotten memories
of old photos from home.

In a Fog

DC and I didn't get along—the first time,
the last, or any time in between.
Grape leaves stuffed and stacked
into a pyramid on the small wooden table,
green and folded, glistening
around the lemon wedges,
were the worst thing my 5-year-old mouth
had ever encountered courtesy
of Vladimir, the Russian ballerino my family
had sponsored, who ended up living with us
for years, had just moved out of our home
to Washington, DC to teach ballet.
I didn't understand why we were there
without my father, but the monuments
rang that same true song of enormity as all the other times,
granite and marble, impressive
with a familiar tinge of distress

as they did twenty years later, in DC to study,
while I packed my room to go on a lasting
vacation—a true vacation to Thailand to visit Whitney
but more away from my dismal time
in one of the greatest cities in the world.
I was lonely when I stood in the heart
of the metro, wishing someone would push
me into the rails before the rush of warm air
coursed through and blew my hair and skirt
as I held it down and clutched the same black
workbag I would take to Thailand.
I stared at my packed suitcase, the U-Haul, and empty

room then flopped on the couch to sleep knowing
this was my last night in the home
where I had learned to cook, write, drink too much
and try to love but failed. I slept deep
and woke to a foggy morning that I watched
as I sat on the stoop with a cup of coffee,
the bricks forming a zigzag chevron pattern
beneath my feet. A mother strolled her child
passed me, and down the hill into the mist.
I made out the tops of rowhouses, a lamp-post,
the road paint on the edge where it was yet opaque,
where everything stood in the stillness,
saturated and waiting for the fog to pass.

Because Today My Family Sold My Grandparents' House

I love to reminisce on my grandparent's home
where I spent half my time while my parents
were separated—the one-story brick house
in the middle of Jackson, Mississippi cupped
on either side with five acres of unruly land.
I'd find my grandparents in their specific places
daily when I'd walk into the kitchen after school—
the closed door of granddaddy's gun room filled
with armory and tools, the floor peppered
with empty bullet casings and gun powder. It always
smelled of ant-bed killer and gasoline.
I would creep in after he'd left and examine it all—
the rusted teeth of a saw, dry cracking tires
to an old boat trailer, the cavities of an open rifle
I liked to gently graze my fingers
across but was careful not to leave my mark,
any hint I was there. But my grandmother loved
to have me in her space—the backyard.
And I could always guarantee she
would be there sitting on an iron chair
to the right of "my tree" looking at her acres
and acres of pine, the garden in the back
with an inflatable shark as a scarecrow,
and the little freshwater pond fringed in bamboo.
She sat with her legs crossed at the ankles,
hands on either arm rest. And I want to show you
these places, tell you all my childhood stories—
the you that's far away, the wrong you.

I want you to feel the grainy gunpowder beneath your toes
and see the kudu heads mounted on the wall.
We'd be incredibly quiet
but then I walk you to the yard
where we stand in the thick of the bamboo
and breathe the cooler air and wonder how it got there—
how the patch grew into an oasis in the middle
of the Mississippi pine, how it's been there
since my grandparents built the house,
how the fresh water is a constant tide
rising from the Yazoo clay.
But why do I want to bring *you* here?
Not my current lover who adores me, but you,
my former partner in crime across
the Chiang Mai string of bars, both of us barefoot

and sitting cross-legged on the mat floor
of the Thai beer joint looking up
at the glow-in-the-dark plastic stars
on the ceiling fans till we would leave
and go to my hotel situated thirty minutes
from where you were supposed to be
and the entire time trying not to let the tuk tuk driver
see our faces or wandering hands that became
our only form of communication then
and later as we still stay in touch yet when we speak
I feel the same sorrow as remembering my grandparents'
home— that same yearning of place, of consistency, but also
of adventure. That is my pull towards you
and of the days we'd talk for hours
knowing our time, our unsatisfied love, was the kind
you only end up telling stories about.

Thailand

The fog covering the spatchy green forest
of Chiang Mai mountains was thick and creamy
like warming egg whites over a fresh black pan

and we stared at it from the concrete side of a pool
at an incredibly cush hotel a half-hour
via tuk tuk from the bulge of the city.

It was quiet and so were we as we bobbed in the water,
nervous to touch but wanting the warmth of another's body
and I wanted you to pull me

down if you wanted to, and I hoped that you wanted too
and to pretend that this moment was more
than sudden vacation love because that wasn't enough

for me or you I'd learn as we spoke on our phones later
from across the Atlantic, both finally home, but remembering
that dense fog, and the thick steam later rising from our bath

was as heavy and limp as our bodies as we exited the waters.

Tight Frame

My lover thinks I sleep too close to him at night.
In my slumber I press my entire body against his

and eventually force him to the edge of the bed.
I don't sprawl out with all the extra space

on my side, but stay a straight switchblade in its pocket case.
He asks why I do this, and I lie and say I'm not sure,

or play coy and tell him it's because I want to touch him
all the time, but really what I don't say is that my father

let me sleep with him in his twin bed at his family's home
in a different city than my mother, instead of in the matching

twin next to his that my sister slept in. He wasn't a small man,
but let me rest pressed against his long, warm back

in the tight frame of mattress because I thought if he left
again I would be the first to feel it.

Grapes

The Swede in all his tanned, Scandinavian glory wore a mustard sarong and blond pony tail as he held out a sandy plastic bag bulging with black grapes above my face as I sat Indian style on the Malaysian sand the color of sugar equally as sweet as each pop of purple that burst between my teeth after cupping a clump between my legs and staring at that violent shade of violet, shining and wet, that same color as the two-piece business suit the older black woman wears at the Nashville bus stop, wiping her face, her glasses with a paper napkin as the rain pours down on her and her portfolio dotting everything a shade darker and I watch as her clothes bleed from violet to almost black. I think about offering her a ride but don't—I sit dumb at the light watching her through my drizzling passenger window, anxious to decide whether to be *that* person—the kind whose mind is in the moment and acts on it like the Swede who made everyone in our group from 5 countries in the world who had just met sit squished up against each other on the big piece of driftwood to keep company and watch the full moon grow from beneath the clouds— or to be just *somebody*. I drive away as the light turns green—and I don't know what doesn't stop me—just as unknown as the sag of regret after a never-offered proper goodbye to the man who bought me fresh fruit, talked with me on the porch floor for hours, and showed me the beauty of a place we discovered together.

And Today I Substitute Taught a P. E. Class

I told you about my day—
the school was full of upper-class kids
behaving well and wanting to run
like crazy after a green nerf ball,
the other teachers and coaches were kind,
the facility was in good condition,
I got paid poorly but it was something,
yet the entire time my mind wandered
to you, inappropriately as there were
children around, but I couldn't help it.

The fact that you taught P.E. at a London
elementary school, the way you saved money
to travel Southeast Asia for six weeks, the incredible
yet incredibly short time we spent together
was all I thought about. We were supposed to meet
in Ko Phi Phi for a few days of being just together—
seeing the white limestone mountains,
perfect beaches, and blue caves.
It didn't happen. It was horrible. But today
I felt close to you among the children and basketballs
and swish of nets because I pictured you
with me, dragging a soccer goal and squatting down
to be eye level with a kid—to finally do something together.

Doing Nothing

Who knows what the hell I'm supposed to be doing
but I'm sure it's not sitting on top of your bed
while you work all day and I'm sure it's not
talking to another man I met months ago on one
of the best trips of my life and I definitely know
it's not now wandering around Memphis killing time
till you come home and we go drink too much
and flop on a cold park bench downtown
with the ice still on the ground and lamp posts and glazing
the trees and watch other drunk people slipping and tripping
down the frozen trolley tracks till they find another bar
to warm their bellies and hands and it's so predictable
and cold I can't take it. You talk slow and long as usual
as I stare off and wish I was in my tan skirt
and sandals walking through the Temple of the Emerald Buddha
in Bangkok where groups of tourists swarm each structure,
take funny photos posing with golden warriors, and speak
a thousand languages. I take a few photos and leave
to buy fried egg rolls from a street vendor and eat them
with toothpicks out of a plastic baggie
filled with a sweet, golden sauce before the heavy clouds
appear and scare the tourists into taxi cabs,
but I have no place to be and I don't care if I am this warm wet
so I want to slowly roam the alleys and watch the vendors
pack their trinkets—gold bangles, fake teeth, decorative
yet dull knives—cover their stands with plastic wrap
or put everything into a worn, beige hard suitcase
because watching these strangers move and wondering where
their homes are and me not going back to the apartment
but walking till I don't want to anymore and spending
the day with myself doing the best kind of nothing
in this foreign place surely is more of me than this in Memphis,
this idle-minded and lackadaisical cast of myself.

If All Of My Flaws Were To Be Counted

If all of my flaws were to be counted
I'd lay them out one by one in front of me

for you to see. I'd space them enough so even
the little ones were made clear and not masked

by jealousy or insecurity, but the time you
sat with legs crossed at the table by the bar,

leaning back in your chair oh so cool
among your friends with your tidy hair

and handsome face, expensive shirt and clean shoes,
and made a joke about my body that undressed me

in front of them, down to my naked form, and then
you mocked me, mocked what I looked like during

our private time together and compared me
to a little boy. I didn't get up and leave, although

humiliated, embarrassed, because I didn't then
see it as your flaw, but as my own.

At Wat Indra Viharn, Bangkok, Thailand

I watched a monk pray
for forty-five minutes
from the doorway
of Wat Indra Viharn
before I walked away
barefoot to find my shoes
and taxi driver.
The monk didn't move,
but sat still on the floor,
white robe and shaved head
with a plastic baggie
of wet, sliced oranges beside him
and a canvas pouch of loose tea leaves.
There were two signs displayed
before him, reading "Please Do Not
Sit, For Monks Only."
And I wondered how it felt
to stay so still and focused
within an elaborate red and gold
monastery temple surrounded
by gaudy, shining Buddhas—
so much to stare at
and enjoy and I thought
for a while about times
I've considered meditating,
not on God but on everything
but myself—lying on a cracked plastic
lawn chair by the neighborhood pool
during winter, chilled and alone
but happy to be anywhere
other than with
my fighting mother and sister
who screamed and threw telephones
at each other while my father
was in a different city
because my parents
were separated. I would bring
a stack of books,
mostly kids series,
two peanut butter sandwiches,
and a canned Coca-Cola so I could
read for as long
as I could stand the cold.
Nobody bothered me

because no one saw me.
Part of me wishes
someone had come along,
had sat beside me or even
just knew I was there.
I'll never know how long
the monk stayed—I left
to find food and tamarind paste—
how long it took him
to do what he came there for,
or where he went after
but I've thought about him
many times, about how he found peace
or silence or whatever
in a place so bustling
and bright and full of people
who came there looking
for their own answers.

Elegy

Our love was born among the cassia trees,
between cold 24-ounce beer bottles the same
thick midnight blue as the night air around us.

Our love was born ill, but we loved it and I loved
Drew's demeanor, the raw joy and thrill
of seeing him tumble like a boy into the Andaman Sea.

I've never seen anything as fantastic as when he
stood and turned his tanned, muscle-bound body towards
me to clip at me in cockney to "get in here, Cazza."

I wish there were more memories like this:
bobbing in the warm water watching a small boat of people
toss raw chicken skins to the native eagles,

the green rock islands dotting the backdrop, his one dimple,
the arm around my waist holding me up in the deep part where we
laughed with each other and spoke about our families,

but the saturation of every acute detail
and emotion I replay makes me wonder
if I'll have that again.

I stand before myself,
giving this talk that gives no absolution
but more of sleep to the freezing—

I watch my lips plod in place between
the wet, clear streak I swiped in the mirror
and mouth to myself how wrong it's been

to have a piece of my mind left
with him in the clear waters of southeast Asia
as the rest of me showers in my boyfriend's

tiny, yellow bathroom in Tennessee,
naked and privately mourning the imminent
end of our eight-month sinning

lasting longer than it should have,
longer than it should have had momentum for.
But I wish we could command our love to be well,

to be fair, to be actual. I don't know
what this ritual will do,
but hopefully put it to rest.

At the Eleventh Hour

We raced to the wall of windows overlooking
downtown to see the fireworks spill into the skyline
as the New Year arrived, but bustling
in my sparkly dress around everyone's
heads bobbing left and right to get a view,
I only saw white smoke the shape
of something like a spider drift right
in the wind. I missed it and felt
this was a poor way to start off 2014.

The market was closing,
packing away food in metal containers:
saffron biryani, the puckered pani puri,
and frozen kulfi the color of my new friend
Francois' worn yellow tank top as he maneuvered us
through the warm night air to an open table next to
a food stand parked in a puddle where all
we could hand-motion to order was noodles.
I had wanted to see and eat my way
through the Little India market
but after drinks at the shop across the street
from our hostel we were a little too slow.
I wished to see and do much more than what
I did in Thailand and Malaysia. I would miss
the Full Moon party where you and I were supposed
to meet and spend a few days travelling the islands
together, miss the train, miss the Bangkok market,
miss your jaunt in the same city I had just left.

But missing the fireworks made me miss you,
you who told me I had to be there, to wander the stalls
and point to order, to enjoy the dim light
of bare bulbs, to take a tiny piece of India
in the middle of Malaysia. We said we wanted to
visit India at some point, together, to be the best
travelling buddies and it would be
the perfect way to spend weeks living—
to live a life we only wished could grow.

Remnants

I've carried the same beige snakeskin bag
for eight months, through the wet night streets
of Washington, DC where the yellow street lights and fog
smear over the black sidewalks and roundabouts
like a fresh oil painting, beautiful and bleak, imprecise
and lenient as I walked home trying to disappear
into it, for those hours to just not be at all,
not be homesick for Mississippi, for the warmth
and gleam of the steady sun rising over the kudzu leaves,
not be living day to day only looking forward
to the airport terminals and security check lines
with this damn bag filled with what I imagined
I could need for a 22-hour flight that would take me
finally to smiling Thailand and its air flush
with the smell of musk fern and teak tinged
with red chillies and coriander I purchased
stuffed deep among the ticket stubs and flight itineraries
littered throughout my purse I held so close to my body
as I walked the stalls of the day markets
of Koh Phangan and Penang then suddenly

I'm in Nashville where it is time
to unpack and organize, yet I have refused
and instead I let it all toss together, the boarding tickets,
baht coins, hand-written receipts, and crumpled wads
of ringgit with the trash I've collected in Tennessee,

but hidden in the back of my wallet sits safely
the piece of newspaper with a foreign phone number
scribbled on it in pencil I can't forget.

Union

Today my best friend will get married
and I can't take it. As I sit on the sofa
with my computer, careful not to lean back
and crush the delicate yet concrete poof
the hairdresser created as a bridesmaid look
for the wedding a few hours from now,
I'm having a hard time being happy—
not because of her, she's a gem,
but due to you because later as I stand
in front of hundreds of people
inside a fancy church where outside
the December rain freezes as it drips
from the ledges, I'll wear a stone colored dress
too tight for me and shoes that hurt
to watch my sweet friend unite
with her kind mate and only think of holding hands
with you across the lap-height table
your long limbs barely fitting,
my skirt laying a flat circle
around me like the lip of a tea saucer
or one of the purple pressed flowers we saw
in the night market, nursing beers
that sweat in the air that held us
up and in place like warm bath water.
You said I should *write more things down*,
that remembering the *little goods* are hard
but the *big bads* so easy, and I didn't write it
like you said, but kept it in a notch in my mind
till now, that living should be fluid and warm
like the Ko Phangan wind between
the mountains around us and that it
should be moving and lively even though
cracked in places but today
I feel nothing but discomfort and solitude
as she wears her beautiful lace,
cuts the cake, and rides away in a Cadillac
because since I left you, or you left me,
I've had a yen for something
I only held for the one night
that was worth a damn.