

ABSTRACT

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THE RECREATED DAY

Amanda Giffi, Master of Fine Arts, 2014

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This collection begins with water and ends with winter. It is the first person account of the coming of age of a young woman, who sees water and the two equinox seasons, winter and summer, as threads that run through this life's story. As the young woman moves through both years and space, her home near Cleveland, OH, the Gulf of Mexico in Florida, the Low Country in South Carolina, San Diego, Gambier, (OH), Chicago, Washington DC, Paris, and Rome, she understands the passage of time through what she sees when traveling and also, through personal relationships. She pauses, to consider her childhood, again, particularly memories from the winter and summer, before she examines her early adult years, eighteen through twenty-five, through the lens of a rather disastrous relationship that endured throughout that time.

THE RECREATED DAY

By

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My Own Itinerary

We always went to Bradenton in the spring
when the smell of Tropicana making oranges
into orange juice was enough to make me forget
I'm afraid of bridges and the road back to Tampa
to the airport is only possible via the Bob Grahame
Sunshine Skyway Bridge. In 1980, the original bridge
was destroyed when a ship couldn't avoid
going through it. The one survivor stood
on the wreckage, throwing 40 white carnations into the Gulf.

The new bridge was dedicated four months before
I was born. When I had only seen the Gulf of Mexico,
I didn't know how anyone found the ocean beautiful.
The Atlantic around the Carolinas was the same to me.
Water the color of murky sand and the shells
were nothing worth filling suitcases with sand
that would never quite leave over. One time we
bought a sand dollar because I could never find
one whole. It broke in my suitcase—

I can still see the white pieces broken in a paper towel
presented to me as an apology.
Water like that of my imagination—clear and blue-green—
the water I colored in my drawings of the ocean, I found in the Caribbean.
I prefer the dark blue that I see in the Pacific. Maybe because it's the ocean
I almost drowned in, the undertow pulled me into a somersault
and I didn't know which direction wasn't water, but
I knew I couldn't breathe. No one noticed that I
had gone under. It's possible I didn't almost drown.

Devonian Pines

My Devonian pines are
the descendants of the earliest pines,
Devonian gymnosperms,
but this is not in their name:
Midlands and Coastal Plain pines
called Longleaf, *Pinus palustri*,
for their needles,
though leaf hardly seems accurate.
Long could be for the trunk,
sometimes reaching one hundred feet
where the branches don't emerge
until maybe forty feet,
and the bark isn't smooth like Northern pines
it is thick and scaled, reminding me of Redwoods.
The air here is too saturated with moisture
to carry the scent of pine and if I didn't look up,
I wouldn't know these trunks for what they are.
I think predecessors to these pines
that had long smooth trunks
and no branches just a tuft of needles
at the top like a fan or feather
oversaw this island's formation.
I see my pines through the bathroom windows
high enough as to almost be skylights
so that all I can see out of them is sky and branches.
I look before I go to sleep
and see an outline of pine when I close my eyes.
I followed the trees to the water
where turning away from the people
I saw what I think has been here longer:
the hermit crab—crawling back into the water,
spinning in the waves, toiling, it looked to me,
the small seemingly transparent fish in the water so close
to the shore I wondered if the waves pushed them out
or if they were the miniature waves
their tiny motion resembled.
Looking out at the water
I could hear the call of the epochs—
I could be in the time when pines emerged.
The repetition of the waves coming into shore
seemed to be pushing them out to me
and naming the epochs:

Paleo-archean, Eocene, Pliocene.

This an invitation so that I would be part of them
and add my name to that list.

The last of the wave, the foam, the last murmur of the beckoning
followed again by its own renewal, the renewed cry to join it,
the water's warmth amplified its invitation

I would not yet need to renounce my skin to get in.

But how could I join the ocean?

Standing in it was not joining it.

I must undo my separateness.

Do I go in where the water ends
and the land begins where I would
be returned to shore and pulled out again
as my skin, tissue, muscle are broken
down before water could flood in,
broken into bone that water cannot fill.

The small bones: carpals, tarsals, talus, vertebrae,
individual ribs distinguishable by length
would be lost, scattered like shells, stones,
or pieces of coral, no different to anyone who found them

I would be long bones: femur, humerus, radius, ulna,
a clavicle or both may last

or the clavicle's singular shape may keep it from being overlooked on shore
smoothed over and preserved so the deterioration already
present would be erased making my age undetectable
and fitting for the eras.

Would my skull-cap be deposited on the shore—empty like armor,
like the Horseshoe Crab shell I walked past
(but stopped to examine to imagine it was mine)?

These crabs are more ancient than even my pines.

Or do I walk until water covers my head?

That seems like a deliberate drowning
and the ocean would take but not transform me.

Or do I go at night? It seemed the time
to dedicate myself to the ocean.

But going, the tide was so low
and it was so dark, the water hardly seemed present
and the distinction between it and land
was the moon reflecting on the water.

The ocean was calm and had no call for me
and night seemed a more deliberate way
to slip away.

The ocean is more like a resignation
that I'm not ancient nor meant to be.

Gray Days—

like a run down city, as when the lake is
frozen over, or so polluted patches of it
declared dead.

They're like the scenes of industry left: the idling
steel mill, shut down Ford Plant,
the bridge into the city that might crumble,
but can't be closed, and strange day-time quiet.
But after a late August rain, the street,
lights reflecting on the road give the city

an orange glow, something pointing forward.

That led me to a city
too easy to admire
with its gray skies and rain that seem better
suited to its mood, an umbrella always.
They're the back-drop for buildings
in the same palette, golden hued
with their slate gray roofs, reflections
in the Seine, the cars in subdued hues,
and after the rain, colors, like royal
gardens, the green against the overcast

sky that won't blow over and shouldn't.

The gray and rain are sometimes,
just water, not my polluted lake,
calling to me. Calling to me like seeing
the country from the plane's window,
small enough to see coast to coast,
but on the ground and far from water;
it's dust that calls—
the new stacked on old to preserve
the fields of the Circus Maximus, also
bath and market, incomplete and everyday.

The city is so insistent on my own preservation.

Again

I had a teacher who said, “In American Literature,
nature always wears the colors of the spirit.”
He meant Ishmael but it wasn't the real November
but the one inside of him, he went to sea, he was still there.
What about Prufrock, was his nature was indoors,
was his spirit coffee spoons and marmalade and toast?
I don't remember the teacher speaking another way.
I'm not in that novel or that poem but there are
days I want it to be true and I try to test it but those
days when I don't notice much beyond my shoes
they're usually black, and each step is another vibration
of the rolling heat that sits in my chest—it spreads to
my stomach, dissipates and returns, and maybe
I notice what kind of day it is, but it wouldn't matter
because I'm too busy holding my breath escaping is more time passed
is another minute I should have spent doing more than remembering
there will be time there will be time
deep breaths are calming but I insist on the shallow ones.

The Hour—

between ground and light
reveals what glossed until spring

sun recalls me
to when day ignited in our hands

where I the beginning
folded into uncertain words

my outline as in charcoal
blended past recognition

where you are a collection
voice imagination

that I cannot speak about

and I am lit by moon
over a bed of thyme

Home

Now that I wasn't home
you felt like home.
That was too much for you,
you couldn't absorb my sadness,
my longing for home. I needed to find
a way to preserve our time that
I had waited to restore,
insisting on you. I didn't want to
undo my waiting, to be wrong.
I thought of how I could sustain
myself there with you, to prevent you
from becoming a detail of Maryland,
a place I'm not sure will ever yield to me.
I would collect the years,
examine each one, and select what
would fortify me now.
But the years come in pieces
and never all at once.
It isn't time that's moving, it's us.
I need an afternoon
in grass that covers my feet as I walk—
night won't do, this would resemble
striving for sleep—I could press myself
into the ground, the closer I am to it,
the easier I can stop movement.
The warmth from my body would
stop the earth in my approximation
not of death but of breathing stillness.
I would speak softly into the ground.
Maybe you would feel my words
as you walk. Or maybe because
I whisper them into the ground
the dead would intercept my words
and only a vagueness or nothing
at all would come up
through the ground to you.
When I and earth are still
the years will come all at once.
I will give a color to each,
ours in blues punctuated
by the white of absence.
I haven't gotten all the blue off yet.
I don't want to give it up...not all.
This is what I can preserve,

what I could hold in my hands,
but I could not reconstruct.
If I could, I would make you
slow time too. You would be
next to me, your body pressed into earth,
you too would see our years.
It's as if repeating something makes it true.

Clearing

Do you know what it is to bury the harvest here?
Maybe you do not.

Did you forget, while I turned to till new soil
you left our plants to exposure,
late summer withheld rain?

You returned here to inter the last reminders
into the earth—what you suspect does not breathe.
When you touch the dirt it is with fear
earth will not release your skin.

I have dirt in my blood and cannot leave this garden.
The vegetable rot could revive it
but I will not.

Where Soil is Men Grow

What is left for uprooting?
Inkberry hawthorn, bull thistle, tansy-mustard
and in every state, common yarrow—
Their rot suggests that I should not have been introduced.

I have my pail of discarded sound.
Here wind sorts no seasons: for they belie themselves with light.
Here I envision the sky in water growing leaves that are us.

We have forgotten what to call these sounds
Because we misplaced time left out for drying.
So, I walk one step for each year that went un-pressed.

Look, I know what I would keep from here:
That I might carve a rainstorm to startle me to sleep.
That I might arrange the alphabet of tree.
That the length of my unknowing
not compress to interpretation.
Keats knew to revive is to return.

My words hand me an opening of unfaithfulness
and I am again sorting through unwanted plants.

Vision of Two

I dreamed the earth opened
into color.

In violet grass
my hair indistinguishable purple
while floating camellias serve as clouds.
One, two, then seven
descend to nest in the bend of my arms

Sycamores slowly uproot—
arrange themselves to share sun,
drop nearly-turned
blue leaves onto my shoulders.

Camellias-sycamore clusters,
languid flush of colors—
through these I watch the moon
take sun's place.

Moon lights orange
I walk incandescent.

It is too sweet.
I instead want
a morning where
sky and ground
no different in gray,
sun, fading white.
Where I in
grass, gone brown,
gathered to sticks
with moon no brighter than sky.

And the sycamores move
not toward me
or at all.

I too am still
into the night.

*This gave me that precarious gait
Some call experience.*

Tuesday

I am in Ohio for the first day of spring
the warmest one for a hundred years.

From the driveway I see the section of the playground
visible between the houses across the street

and I see another March day, one memory constructed.
It might have been April, but there is no way to tell.

I don't want to be wearing my purple coat,
the one with fleece inside, the one from fall

that Mom says I can't take off because sixty degrees
in March is not the same as sixty degrees in May.

My friend is here too, without her coat,
she tells me to put mine on the bench next to hers.

She's always telling me what to do and she's older,
so I usually listen. Besides, I want to do this.

We look back at my house and realize if I stay off
the swings visible from my driveway, I won't be found out.

We are forever scheming to hide what seems so big,
mud splattered on our shoes or paint spilled on our jeans,

our elaborate stories...I look at my friend's house
and I'm no longer in the recreated day.

She's moved and married, but whenever I'm home
I like to check on her bedroom windows for her.

1999—

The last year all of us were in the same school,
in the *same* place, really, even though we still
lived on the same street until we started to go to college.
There was one of us in almost each grade from K-8th.
On the first day of school, we lined up
from youngest to oldest, one of the few days
we did not go in uniform. We carried plastic bags
of classroom supplies and were sent off in the August
humidity to stifling rooms with no fans and open windows

that did nothing. I'm sure there was a picture
of this lineup, this last one, but I don't know where it'd be.
There's one from 2000 when I'm the oldest. I know the dress
and I think now navy was a strange choice because that was the color
of our uniforms. Navy was the color I would wear to school everyday
for twelve years and one I still won't chose to wear almost ten years later.
For a school with only 600 some students in 9 grades,
we rarely saw each other at school, that *same* place.
The school bus was where we socialized. It was here I was first cursed at,

and it was where I did the only thing I was ever sent to the principal's office for.
I remember my daydreams more than I remember any particular class
because we were the only kids I cared about, the only people
I still know from that time. When I walked down the halls
to lunch, I saw myself in that world in the world of a time in American history:
manifest destiny, or the waves of immigrants in the early 20th century.
I didn't have any friends in that class that year. But what I most remember about those
years is spring as if fall and winter didn't last as long or nothing happened then
but really, I think it's because I can remember what it smelled like

each spring smells the same, the warmth coming back to the air,
the grass damp for weeks after the last of the snow melts,
the way the warm air is perfumed then but not later in the year.
It was also what I added to it, the Gap perfume, Dream,
that will always mean 1999. The year before my class,
that friendless class, planted a lilac bush. I think is still
in the flower bed outside the main office. And yet, lilacs remind
me more of my house, where after a decade of showing nothing but leaves,
our transplanted bushes did bloom. But this happened years after I left the tiny school.

To Marissa—

I haven't spoken to you alone
since sometime last year.
I don't know when I will again.
You were talking for me
I think, that afternoon
when our families
stopped in my kitchen
at my sister's graduation party.
Your family was going back
across the street soon but
you were getting married
in three weeks
so we acted out our childhoods.
You chose a June memory:
that morning we rode
together towards swim practice
but went instead to the pond
circled by uniformly gray pebbles
that made our helmets shake.
A fence of pines separated
us from the houses.
We imagined this was how
it used to be before houses
but I think the houses
had been there longer.
Our sense of history was off.
We had books to keep us
until practice was over at 10:45
and the soft plastic water bottles
that came with our bikes
to pour over our heads.
It almost looked as if
we'd been in the pool.
We didn't smell like chlorine
and our skin wasn't dried out;
our mothers didn't notice.
Why should they?
This isn't the way you told it,
that memory is still just ours:
we usually went to practice
and when we got tired
of swimming, we walked
our laps in the shallow end,
a bouncing or bobbing

as we mimed the strokes
with our arms. It's no
surprise what I remember
most from swim meets
is the night I was the anchor
of the slowest relay
and had to swim
my 50 meters alone.

July

All year I'd wait to read in the Adirondack rocker.
Each summer— seeking out the longest books.
And I must have done this countless times—look up
from the page into the London Plane, the name I
preferred for the sycamore, the leaves edged in sky,
thinking the sky would never be quite this same
shade of blue again. This was when I could look
above and past the tree to stare into the sky, when
it didn't seem that much taller than I was, when I liked it best
because it was the only tree with a branch low enough
to climb to. But what I liked more was that it was sick.
The big leaves would brown and drop too early,
in the summer. Something about not enough moisture.
Its summer brown leaves were an early nudging toward
the inevitable fall. I know one of those breaks I was reading
North and South and what I remember most was Ashton's
button collection but I can't remember, did she carry
small scissors with her? No, she must have ripped them off.
Or a year before that, preferring Fanny Price above all
other Austen heroines, because I thought myself plain
and unnoticed like Fanny, years before criticism
told me that was odd. Or a few years later, finding
Dagny Tagert's coldness appealing as I did the train and
red sun on the original 1957 cover of *Atlas Shrugged*.
Now, I think I was deciding what woman to become
and how often woman seems to mean alone just as
it was only the London Plane, the book, and me.

August

Back when Ohio Edison couldn't quite power our street consistently, maybe it was the location—the Cuyahoga-Medina county line, we could expect summer evenings where we'd be the only street without power. Sometimes we'd steal flashlights and outside played tag where if the light catches you, you're it. Or we'd play baseball thinking the white of the ball would act as light. August 2003: what we thought was a routine outage was more than just our street and more than just an evening. We left our dark houses—unnatural and almost frightening in the perpetual dark—with the contents of our freezers, whatever hadn't melted yet. This time we brought no flashlights, those were valuable now, but in my image of this night there was a certain brightness. It wasn't moonlight but orange-light, as if memory has a light of its own. Someone brought Pepsi—in cans we called *pop*. One of the youngest of us made one can prove its name, throwing it on the ground, the burst of sound somehow louder without light.

Sundays in January

The hills behind the soccer field
I drove past today are hardly hills,
more like slight rises of grass.
We would sled on the biggest one
winter after winter.
When you turn the corner,
the other hill peeked out from between
houses. We liked it better but
were banned when those whose
houses bordered the hill became
upset we were stepping on their
snow. Our town has actual
hills but you need a car to go
and those hardly hills were all ours.
These hardly hills will always
be the site of my first act of infamy:
when I passed a sled not to Alysia's
hands but her lips. I didn't think
purple plastic could injure
but that her tears were shock
and wanting to be inside.
This dark Sunday evening was a
call to go home. My own shock came
later when my father thought I had
done this with some intent and
and although a child myself,
I still had responsibility over the younger ones.
She and my sister cried often; how was I to know
this cry was any different? There was no blood.
I was made to write an apology letter
and when I delivered it, her father
laughed. He knew it was an accident.
We are still neighbors when we visit
our parents' homes and last winter
as she, my sister, and I sat in our
kitchen, for a night of baking and wine,
I thought of that Sunday, at least fifteen years
past and wondered if that accident weren't a
nearly undetectable bond?

Winter Memory

The backyard is where snow entertained us,
but the front yard I insisted to my brother
and sister must stay as it is, untouched.
A child knows there are things worth
preserving. Their bedroom windows overlooked
the backyard that they could trample.
Their footsteps became places
where grass would show itself
long before winter was over.
My windows faced front—I wanted to look out
and pretend no one steps on the white.
Their small bodies (still smaller than mine)
were heavy with the warmth of winter padding,
they pulled each other on the small blue sled,
the one we brought from our first home,
or sometimes, threw themselves onto
their backs moving their arms and legs
back and forth to give themselves wings,
though their bulkiness made it look as if
they were making tiny craters and growing
bored of this and forgetting my insistence,
stomped into the front yard leaving their
boot holes and sled tracks on what I
wanted clean. These two already knew
this wasn't what anyone could hold.

First Movement Op. 27, No. 2 (Moonlight Sonata)

Mary Ruefle said, “You have to like being alone in a room.”
I had to learn alone before I could learn words. I see myself
in our living room, the one with the baby grand and
while she didn’t say anything about dark, this was a dark room.
I had a ritual before I would go to the room: close all the blinds
on the first floor as soon as it was dark and as I did this, I’d worry
that I was boring. It was a crushing worry—that no one wanted to
talk to me, that the next day at school no one would. And so I played.
I must see myself playing in the winter because
it is too dark to be any other season’s evening. I hadn’t yet
learned discipline, the unspoken meaning of sitting alone in a room,
even though the aloneness was a creation. The repetition of practice
now reminds me of writing words until there is a poem. I sought images
in music before I could create them in words. The first two measures
sounded like the ocean but not moonlight or night at all even
though that’s when I’d play. Waves are constant and when
the chords change, it didn’t seem like ocean. I thought
I was interpreting or reinterpreting Beethoven’s lonely voice.
I liked all the black keys and their strange mournful sound. I learned
Beethoven did not give it the silly Moonlight name
but it is rumored to be a love song for Giulietta Guicciardi.
She may have only been a decoy to keep secret her cousin Josephine’s love
for the composer. Around the time of this sonata, he wrote to an unidentified woman:
“I can only live either wholly with you or not at all, and
yes I have resolved to stray about in the distance,
until I can fly into your arms...”
As I played, it never sounded like a love-song to me.
Sometimes after looking up at the notes and pausing
to figure out the notes off the staff, I swear I heard a woman formed
out of the bars and notes. Maybe it was Giulietta and it wasn’t
meant to be love but how a woman can be forgotten and makes
this strange mournful sonata just as absence can make a poem.

Early Winter

Was it then, as we stood between our cars, both wondering if you would kiss me goodbye that you noticed my winter skin even in summer? I think you knew then that I would be the warmest part of winter.

We walked the city together, transients in this transient city, neither of us home, but temporarily settled. Had I known this would be an exchange, my warmth for a few months, I never would have driven into the dark

without you even one night. Without you, always, you've never been here, my home, but you color everything—The days of sun obscured by cloud, the frozen earth, the cold itself. What else could they be but reminders

that you are gone? Sleep should be like death, but my dreams—my mind is full of you, creating excuses for your abrupt silence so that when I wake I am reminded of it again,

again, each morning the loss is like new. This is the error of hope. It is as if I awake to find you have died when at night you were at least an image I could see. In day, you are nothing.

You were not taken and you will not be restored to me when winter is over. Distance is no more physical than time. You walked away from me weeks before you knew it was for good.

And now there are details that catch me unaware when I don't expect to think of you: someone mentions your name and means you. Someone mentions your last name and doesn't mean you but says it over and over.

And when I'm alone, the details that refuse to slip away, like my favorite novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, that we started to read to each other and though we hadn't gotten to that part yet, we whispered,

"I want to ruin you," but I didn't know that "Good, that's what I want too" would only be Frederic's response, not yours. I can't look at or touch it now.

I Wanted to Walk into My Own Center

October's drowsiness left shades of oranges and reds,
a stepping of muted steps, pauses, and hands pressed open
to allow the closed mouths their airing space,
stretching the tongue through winter's particular white to
unfold the silence curled in the pinks and reds
that for so long had no knowing of their own color.

I had not wanted your arrival in blue.
I wanted no violet tulips or azures, your arms
would be damp and your mouth bent. I wanted not
until your nothing settled under my fingertips
and behind my knee caps. We two stepped into
the blaze of stillness underneath the pines

that watched while we slept. Now a steadiness
weaves through our hair and into our voices.
We are a blur of red, a statement of the light
that breathes through closed arms into cities
forgotten by a need to surround
a conversation about distance.

Lunch with Christopher

We are both meant to be away from home.
I think you will soon be an orphan—
It's why you're sitting here with me now
like the December day when you revealed
you were half-orphaned already.
Did I reach for your hand then as I do now
when you say your mother's cancer has returned?
As a child, I learned to respond,
"You're in my prayers." I don't pray now
or light candles—those are for the dead—
or call to the saints for an intercession:
a litany. I wrote you this letter instead:

Dear Christopher—

I rarely use your given name and sometimes
I forget what it is. I want us to write letters
but you aren't sure because buying stamps annoys
you. What a reason. I don't think we've seen
each other more than five times in the past two years.
Imagine printing emails and saving them
in a box like my letters, I can't, there is something
about handwriting. I have the book you lent me last
winter and the bookmark is a folded paper with scribbles
until I looked closer and saw it was your signature
over-flourished. The closest approximation of a letter I have
from you is the note you passed me in class that you wrote
on a torn corner of paper. I mention Hemingway on it
and I think he will always be a bond between us.
I'll write to you from his letters.
They seem intended from me to you or you to me:
"There's something wrong with us—we're Idealists.
And it makes us a deal of trouble and it hurts us.
But we're that way and we can't help it.
I want you to know this now you are discouraged
but I am the same and we'll continue into the
trouble because we don't know any other way."
Each time I heard from you, I expected you to say this.
Which reminds me that you don't have a reason to stay.
I want you to remain in Ohio so that when I
come home you'll be there. You are as much a
part of it now as my physical home and family,
but without your family, I don't think you will stay indefinitely.
I can't resist sending you a line from a love letter.

Hemingway and Hadley's nicknames remind
me of our nicknames for each other. And love
is something we sometimes approach with curiosity:
"And in the evening—it's too much to stand—sure go
on to the party...but maybe once pretend I'm there.
I wouldn't mind if you sometimes pretend I'm there."

Thinking this way, about what to keep,
it's as if we are again in the Cleveland Art Museum
in the Contemporary art wing.
We sit before a painting of gray desolation.
The sky drains into the ground.
The perspective is the only distinction
between the sky-ground.
The ruin of the empty train tracks is reinforced
by layers of paint that showed the flat parts bare.
The enormous size made standing seem small.
I wrote the title in a notebook I've lost but I remembered reading
1989 on the informational plaque.
It's Lot's Wife. It's France after the War. It's Sodom & Gomorrah.
And there isn't anything else for us to do but sit before it.

I First Saw Her in My 5th Grade History Textbook

It was the red of her robe,
the folds, and shadows
too real to be paint
the ermine lining,
soft as it must be in life.
The caption—her name,
Joséphine, majestic with
a last syllable lingering.

He was the one holding the crown
above her kneeling figure,
dressed like Caesar Augustus
in white, red, and gold, a crown
of laurels, the Pope sitting behind
in robes far less magnificent,
his image clear and the crown
he presented her faint.
She was called Rose
from birth in Martinique.
She was called Rose
in France, the Revolution.
She was called Rose
until he foresaw the need—
name worthy to be crowned.

Notre Dame was dressed like
he was, but today it's just gray
walls and poor lighting. Were they
actually painted in the 19th century or was it
depicted to match him because
he was presenting a new France
to her? He was France, red,
no longer colored the French blue.

He was France and she was
forgotten—dismissed, divorced,
and dead four years after he married
another woman for her womb.
I waited more than a decade
to see what I knew:
Joséphine's kneel before her
husband is eternal.

Winter 2011

Every morning I'd check to see if there was snow
as if to distinguish the days through levels of white.
Outside, I met a man who bought me coffee.
He told me he believed all illnesses
are just the body's desire to communicate;
that you shouldn't leave at all, you shouldn't touch.
No, and what he meant was it's a manifestation of the mind:
he had a sore throat because he desperately wanted
to speak with someone but didn't until his words
had festered in his throat. I laughed at this.

What other secrets would this man reveal?
By his logic, I'd have no reprise from sore throats.
I wanted to listen to him, he taught me chess.
I cautiously slid the pieces and asked if each
move was right.
He told me personalities are numbers
he was the rounded, half-open three, I the pointed four.
By my car, the snow and ice, our goodbye.
I pretended modesty when he tried to kiss me,
I had listened too much already
and I felt a part of the cold and wanted to be.

That spring, as I suffered from allergies,
I wondered if a high pollen count wasn't the cause?
Couldn't it have been: desiring too much of the world and breathing it
becomes too much for the nose and mouth to withstand—
a stomach ache is the head and feet have a disagreement
over where to settle and meet in the middle to battle
and a backache is longing for touch so that just being causes soreness
and a fever is too much energy trapped inside, giving off heat.
I thought about this long after I knew him
and his name withered in my memory.

Rose Hill Mansion

We have been to South Carolina many times
and I, like any Northerner who's read
that infamous novel, wanted to see a plantation.
This place of the first secession looked no older
than my hometown's 1990s development.
This year, 2012, when none of us expected to be here.
We went to the Low Country. To see what is now
styled a mansion but had once been a plantation,
white as if to purify its past, although it was always white,
by premonition it would one day need to be cleansed.
The other people on our tour so smug in their interest
in history, as if no one else was here for that reason.
Smug too about being from the North, expecting
the South to still be on its knees.

The entryway was framed by three arches of pillars
made of cypress that I was told was so hard, I had
to knock on them to believe it was wood.
The pointed arches and the steeply pitched
once cooper gable roof signified its revival of the Gothic.
I was sure I would feel the guilt of the house,
but how should a house be guilty? Opening the door,
I smelled the mustiness that all old buildings have.
And what is the mustiness made of? Years compressed
that seep into the air each time the door is opened.
I wanted to know something of who inhabited the house.
It had been a wedding present of the land's first owner to
his daughter and yet, his portrait was displayed in the middle
of the foyer while hers was near the back.

She who failed to live through the War and didn't
know if her house survived now completed seems
more forgotten than the antebellum labor and
extinct sea island cotton. This foyer that had
been built for her with an open stringer spiral staircase
carefully restored and a now lost skylight of Tiffany's
stained glass I imagined in blues and greens that was said
on clear nights—and there must have been many—
to reflect moonlight, something I thought only happened
in a Keats poem. How many women like her died?

Chicago

This city must exist in other months
but I was only here in August or July,
*the time in which fever
burned with insubstantial things:*

the way clouds shift into rain
in clouds held like breath,
held for the heat to return
for water on skin and hair
does not regenerate itself as light.
It's more as fever that cannot sustain
itself cured until it is beyond recognition.

The way stepping outside
my body was outlined by humidity
like golden skin against winter skin,
this annual illusion of together
does not remember itself as sky.
it is more as the vague movements
of sleep that have no name.

The way returning indoors
does nothing to alleviate the temperature
like hand red against cheekbone,
for this unbalancing of expectation
does not as ground remain itself.
It is more as a year stretched until it breaks,
the pieces an undeterminable amount of time.

Seven Letters to S

(April 2006-May 2013)

First Letter: Dear S, our early years,

In December of the last year, 2006, that we would live in the same place,
I came to your dorm to tell you “happy birthday”
but really, to say “I’m leaving.”
It hadn’t been the same since
the late summer night we took a walk,
it was the second attempt,
the second goading me into admitting
only to respond that you were seeing someone.
The same someone you were again seeing
that summer, 2008, when I lived in Chicago, your home.

The year we didn’t speak.

Early May 2006, still cool: the sendoff for seniors
when the entire campus wakes up into a bottle of liquor.
I don’t remember how I found you—
my friends warned me to stay away—

By the evening concert, I was holding on to you to stay off the grass.
You said, “You know, I’m not looking for a relationship.” I knew.
For the rest of the concert, I wanted to slap you—
later, wine-drunk, sitting in the stairwell, for cell service,
crying on the phone to my friend from high school—I knew.

The Friday after it was much warmer,
lunch in the dining hall—in the open—for the first time.
We sat with members of your *a capella* group.
I didn’t know them and didn’t care to.
I had said I wanted to talk to you—about what you’d said—
and several deep breaths before I could say:

you’d insulted my intelligence—I knew it was only a hookup.
You were the one telling me you’d miss me,
stopping by my room just to kiss me and then you’d have to leave,
working on a paper with me in Gund,
while sending me an email that said I shouldn’t be there with you.
I don’t remember your response in that moment—
that you hadn’t meant it that way? Any of it?

That summer: my nineteenth birthday:
a classical music concert in Millennium Park,
a walk to the beach where you told me all the sand
along Lake Michigan had been brought
there because the sand had been swallowed by the lake
and I doubt that it was truly me who lay down in the sand
without a blanket in a black chiffon dress with tiny white polka dots
—it was *dry-clean only* and I hate the feeling of sand on my skin.

I think a man was watching us.

A week later, I wrote:
*an escape from the now distant sun
they walk in the still humid twilight
on the sands of a man-made beach
possessing the calm of the lake
all under the unseen stars*

Nothing provoked it but in summer 2007
I truly knew that this would be all:
semi-annual rendezvous and irregular text messages.
It took a year—
I wanted you the most that second summer.
This is what I knew for certain:
it's only for the weekend that we pretend to be together.
And it wasn't the same after.

Before, the summer after we had met, I was lonely in my childhood bedroom—
abandoned by friends whose voices I could hear outside—
they were sitting across the street in my childhood best friend's driveway,
drinking coffee, which had been our (hers & my) thing

I was shamed—
such little sympathy for what had happened that night in May—
each life has moments when the life begins again.
And it wasn't the same after 05.06.06.
Their reaction, nearly everyone's reaction,
seemed to say I had asked for it.

But you, S, were gentle with me and your messages reminded me
not everyone was right outside without me.

And yet, weeks earlier telling me that you would miss me over the summer,
which I didn't believe even then. I didn't know why you had to lie.

Returning to school and seeing me in secret the day I moved back,
and later: you let your friends pull you away from me at a party.
I resented you, but I hadn't told anyone
you were "treating me badly," as the rumor went.
You were, and I didn't need to say it.

Still, I threw away a relationship with someone else who wanted to see me every day.

*

2006

The summer after my first year in college,
I spent days at the beach on the West side

of Lake Erie. At first, puzzled,
"beach" meant "ocean" not this still

quiet water, this small shore of sand.
The water cold and the memory of

pollution crawled on my skin.
That March, before I'd ever been in the water,

I went to the lakeshore. Rows of fish
lined up where the water had left them gleaming.

The snow—the hint of a white in the water.
This wasn't a year the Lake was close

to freezing over. But the air was
freezing that day, precisely 32 degrees.

It's supposed to be warmer
by almost-spring. It was warm

that summer, over 90 even before
the equinox. The heat broke

a few days later, it never
lasts. The Lake seemed greater

in the cold. The other Great one
I saw that summer, Michigan,

was more like the ocean I wanted—
bigger, clearer, not tainted by the memory

of when only a handful of the beaches
were safe for swimming. Still cold,

but I went willingly into the water.
Later, sat on the shore watching

a parade of yachts at Belmont Harbor,
off Lake Shore Drive, the lake at night looked

less inviting, ever larger now in the dark
than my little one. My sometimes frozen

one when you'd have to be crazy
to walk onto it, you couldn't easily slip

under, even in the summer, so few of us
had boats, we just waded by the shore.

*

Second Letter: Dear S, maybe it should have been years,

2009—you visited my home, middle-October-Ohio,
one of the few times it wasn't summer when we saw each other,
sitting on a swing in my childhood playground
you told me I was one of the few people you were yourself around.

That morning in my bed, catching up while lying down,
after I had lifted my shirt to show you the less than twenty-four hour old
tattoo on my rib cage,
it would have been so easy to just
forget... That night you challenged my real boyfriend
that you had come all the way
from Chicago just to spend twenty-four hours with me.

I had a feeling—that year, in Chicago in November, that you liked me.
You took me to see *A Streetcar Named Desire*—
and isn't Blanche who I'd become
if men only loved me like they did when I was twenty-two?
Your friend asked if we were together.
When hearing no, saying that I'm cute—
as if that's how people in their early 20s make dating decisions.

But isn't it?

I fell asleep wondering if it'd be so bad
to get up from the air mattress and into your bed. It had been difficult to
resist a month before and I wonder how I resisted twice?
Over a year later, in 2012, when I was again with the man you had challenged back in
Cleveland,
you tried to convince me to see you over Labor Day weekend.
I refused but because I didn't want you to see how depressed I had become.

When you were twenty-one, in 2007, you asked if my feelings would be a “problem,”
“again”
before you'd fuck me and that question didn't stop me.
I came to Kenyon and stayed in your dorm because you'd dumped the girl
you had dropped me for seven months earlier.
She knew I was there and you had to placate her
I only know this because I read your messages while you were gone
but I don't know what you said to her.

I think you didn't care what this did to either of us. Any of us.

It was nearly four years before you let me sleep in your bed.
A year after meeting you, I wrote—After, he hurried upstairs to his own room. He says
he's a finicky sleeper, so I've never slept with him in the sense of sleeping, yet I find it
hard to believe he's kicked his girlfriends out of bed afterwards. I just don't know.

June 2009, a hotel room, getting high, watching *The Land Before Time*—
you were so sad we didn't touch.

You didn't seem there—before that, we'd never let a bed go unused.

This was the end of the lost year the year that might have become years.

The last time I'd seen you, coming back to Kenyon, what was now just your school, I wrote:

As I was leaving his house, he was coming back so I got a hug and that's about all. He had to get ready for the cabaret. I went to it and then walked back with him, said he'd call me later but he didn't. When I asked why he didn't call, he said he had a chill night with his roommates. The people he sees everyday. So typical of him.

And it wasn't the same after.

*

2011 & 2012

For all my time spent in the Atlantic
or at the Great Lakes, I prefer the Pacific.

Its hue seems dark blue and it is cold;
it never feels like bath water like the Atlantic

does in summer. The water here has been
the most threatening: I nearly drowned a man

when I kayaked over his swimming body
and I nearly drowned later when the undertow

held me. I've never come close to that
in any other water, except when I walked

onto a pool cover when I was two years old,
but my former lifeguard father caught me.

The Pacific never seems to be still, like the overcast day
when standing where water only came to my ankles,

I was knocked over twice. Maybe it's the coastal mountains
that make it somehow moodier—

I'd only ever been to the Low Country and the Gulf of Mexico
in Florida and there aren't mountains

there or the two Lakes I know. Once, driving from Irvine
to San Diego, with the mountains on one side and

the ocean on the other, I thought no wonder
my favorite song writer, a New Yorker, has written to this land.

It wasn't mine.
It seemed like something that can only exist on a page.

The last time I saw the Pacific, July 2011, was a few weeks
before my annual Chicago visit. I spent the days

alone and I don't know if I thought of you or of moving
away from Cleveland, or just of the dark blue water.

*

Third Letter: Dear S, almost,

Most recently, in May 2013, I drove to Kenyon to and drive you to Cleveland.
Before we left, it was the lawn outside the dining hall that sufficed
because I wasn't driving my own car—
Labor Day and starting to be warm again, but the grass was still cool.
No one was there or in the tiny town—
A single car drove by but the lawn was set back from the road.
It was strange to have you in my home later—
you subdued and I was entertainer.

You hardly said anything at dinner with my sister and her boyfriend.
On the paper tablecloth I tried to recreate my dad's drawing of when I'd driven over
black ice and crashed my Mini into a (small) tree.
We weren't talking when that happened, a month after I'd left Kenyon; you liked the
story. As we were leaving, I put the brown-paper-carry-out bag over my head—
You had never, in seven years, seen me like this, comfortable.

It was strange to have you reach for my hand
in the backseat of my sister's boyfriend's car.
It was strange to be twenty-five and spend
a sneaky 10 minutes in the basement.

I would come to you breakup after breakup—
2010 2012 2013

You would take me around on your usual errands—
a shadow, but one you'd scold for being silent.
There was never anything I wanted to do
except watch through seasons of television shows
with my head on your shoulder.

The beginning of 2013 was no different—
kneeling on your bed to be the same height,
hugging you, crying the last night I had before going back to school—
you said you felt the way I did.
About school. About your own breakup, I think.

July the summer before—the haze of depression lifting,
in part because of your determination that I see you.

Who is immune to such flattery?

We walked back from brunch; you held my hand.

I said, “It’s almost like you like me.”

Caught in a downpour, we stood in the entryway
of a grocery store, with the carts,
because the store was too cold for my wet skin.
You cupped my cheek with your hand,
and looking at me, before you kissed me,
with that look of desire and that
undercurrent of wanting to hurt me
you must have known you were,
and I wanted you to,
the rain didn’t matter anymore.

A different summer, when you were twenty-four,
at Kenyon for a weekend, and begged me to drive down there
offering only a promise to see me in your car—
still embarrassed for those friends to see me with you?

It wouldn’t be that humid August in your father’s car,
parked on a street that wasn’t out of the way enough.
I backed out but it didn’t matter

I came to you in August to help settle you into a new city, Atlanta,
where you met a woman you didn’t tell me about,
instead suggesting I stow-away in your luggage on your winter trip to Amsterdam.
Around that time, the end of 2011, I showed a friend a video of an *a capella* concert
when you had a solo—she said you looked very prideful.

I hadn’t thought of you with that word. It was the right one.

In 2007, my therapist told me you “acted more interested than you talked.”
Also, that maybe that it’s not I wasn’t good enough for you, but you feared
you weren’t good enough for me. I think she was wrong about that.

*

2009

I spent many afternoons that summer
at the neighborhood pool listening

to songs that reminded me of you
like "My Little Town" but I don't know

anymore why it was a reminder.
Sitting on the edge with my legs

in the water, I'd think about how
the water moves them, how the water

would move all of me if I got in
and stayed still. I don't have memories

of what it was like to not be able to swim
but I've been pulled under for longer

than what's comfortable. Even in a bath,
I'll sometimes think of that.

When I'm flying over water,
like when a plane needs

to turn around over Lake Erie to make
its descent into Cleveland, that even this

lake is larger than I can truly comprehend.
The flight over the Atlantic is hard not because

of its length but because there's nothing
to see but ocean, at night it's like traveling

in one large dark expanse that has encompassed
ships and airplanes and bodies that went in or over it alone.

I also thought of the story of your high school
girlfriend who, after you broke up, threw a gift

you had given her into Lake Michigan.
I laughed but I thought I'd never throw

away anything you gave me. I've kept

the plane tickets from my trips to see you

but you haven't given me anything.
It's afternoons like that one, when thoughts

of you would turn into thoughts of water,
thoughts of what is left behind in it.

*

Fourth Letter: Dear S, I should have taken you at your word,

The summer of '11, after your first year in Atlanta, you were home again,
and you insisted you were allowed a "break" from your girlfriend.

What loyalty did I have to a person I didn't know?

I took the bus to Chicago that time.
The flutter I felt when I saw the bridge into the city
is like the flutter I feel when I drive home from the airport,
it's a nervousness, like meeting someone for the first.
Or maybe that was a specific feeling,
the kind you get when you travel six hours
to rendezvous with another woman's boyfriend.

A year and a half later in Atlanta again, you weren't anybody's boyfriend.
It was strange because it was winter, early 2013.
Since I left Kenyon in 2006, I'd only seen you in the winter one time before this one.
We were at a jazz show surrounded by middle-aged couples
who were less shy than we were so I sat on your lap, but—

I'd been so well conditioned to not show you any affection in public.

I was eighteen when we met and was more experienced than you;
although, that was the semester you gained your reputation.
It seemed like you had a new girlfriend each month—
I would sit in my Modern Europe class,
and stare at the girl, April's girl, with the sharp nose and wonder why
I didn't qualify to be one of your many...hook-ups rewarded with exclusivity.
The first time we kissed was after your *a capella* concert,
not the main spring concert, but an "exhibition" one,
it was almost a ploy, your baritone,
and I've always had a thing for the sound of a man's voice.

We introduced a prospective student to how we spend our nights
in rural Ohio, by smoking up, and after, the kiss.
I didn't remember this night when you asked me about it a year later.

You confirmed my memories. I think that's called control.

We were leaning against the hood of your family Volvo
and you asked why I never kissed you first. I was never sure.
For all the other times I can remember, I don't really remember the other first.
It must have been the night of the power outage—a night of spring concerts,
but not yours.
I wore a black and white polka dot halter,
I've kept seven years now, and delicate peep toe pumps
that weren't meant to be worn on the gravel walkways of the campus.
In the Caples elevator, a girl asked what I was so dressed up for and I said, "life."
She said, "Get it, girl."

In the first week I knew you, I made a joke about all the girls you dated.

You responded, "I'll never date you."

Fifth Letter: Dear S, the end reminds me of the beginning,

It was spring 2013 when you sent a text to ask,
if we lived in the same place, did I think we would date?
Why would you wonder this now
when in a few months you'd be moving farther away from where I lived?
Only to myself did I admit I wanted you to move nearby,
and you had applied for jobs in Washington, DC.
I know it wasn't just distance that prevented a true relationship,
but I wanted to see.
Half a year later, fall, you ask me to visit Dallas
even though you know, you've known, I'm happy with someone else.
In December, you ask if for your birthday you can have twenty-four hours with me.

I told you to stop. But. I didn't want you to go away.

The second summer, 2007, that was the hardest—
it started in May when I drove to Gambier
for the annual spring *a capella* concert.
I sat by myself and waited alone while you received your congratulations.

You spoke to your (recent) former girlfriend.
It was my turn, you hugged me and we chatted and then I left.
I drove back to Cleveland—I spent four hours in my car that evening.
I wanted to—is that what makes it crazy?

We had settled into our biannual visits, maybe one more or one less a year. But—

The frequency of instant messages—the lowest form of communication—
must have been nearly everyday—
and that one text: I kinda wish you were here. Just kinda.
The last time I saw you that summer of '07:
the last time I saw you for almost two years—
a party at your house, a party that I hadn't been invited to
in the first round of invites even though that night had been promised to me—
the party complete with the trio of girls
who had spent their Freshman year following you around
and now had followed you to Chicago,
the weekend you promised to take me to the Field Museum
and to Lollapalooza to see TV on the Radio whose music we played when
you're staring at the sun
you're standing in the sea
your body's over me.

I went to those places without you.
That night you wanted me to stay over—
but I wouldn't be the fourth girl there just to see you.
Especially because of the tiny blonde whose pictures I'd seen,
pictures of her hugging you while sitting in your lap.
I talked to your best friend about our favorite Paul Simon song,
“Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes”—
Paul Simon whose voice comforted me that summer—
and that song, *you're taking me for granted because I please you*—
when I went inside to find the bathroom,
this friend was waiting for me, waiting to kiss me,
but I turned my head and told him it would be weird—he didn't realize why.
I wasn't sure if it was alcohol or my lack of importance to you
that caused the confusion. He tried again.
You saw and thought something was going to happen—
I wonder if there was trepidation on both sides?

The next day:

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.

I miss you and I’m sad I got to see you for little time.”

“I miss you, too, you absolutely should have stayed, haven’t you learned by now to SAY SOMETHING to me.”

“I never seem to learn that and it’s my greatest downfall.”

“Maybe tonight?”

After I watched our band perform, sticky from being outside in the 90 degree heat and humidity, dizzy from that and the train, the train I got on going towards 95th/Dan Ryan because I hadn’t yet been on the L without, and had to jump off and pick up the one going toward Howard, to Clark/Division, nervous as I always, was, the invitation seemed to make up for the rest of the weekend.

*

2006

First week of August, newly nineteen,
return to the Atlantic. My ocean

because it was the first one I saw,
early, before I was a year old.

My ocean like my lake, murky,
not really blue like water is

supposed to be—the warm
tide pools particularly unappealing

like the small holes that crabs crawl out of.
I didn’t know what it was about water

why I thought my own region: hills, trees, rivers
was something less to look at.

It’s the sound, the eternal pull—
unsettling on a calm night when

it’s near-silent and the waxing
moon’s reflection easing the distinction

between sand and water as if
it were one great black path

that I could walk. But when I returned
six years later, I noticed the trees—

the ancient ones, like the first gymnosperms,
all trunk until the top burst of needles.

The pines I saw could be hundreds of years
old, their full height not reached until

a century has passed. These and the ocean
—if I walked along the water, with the pines

to my right, I would be more than this month,
July—there isn't time like that for them,

there is no month they carry heavier than
the others.

*

Sixth Letter, Dear S, that summer said it all,

2007: Home again from Chicago

I surprised myself admitting to you my jealousy of the tiny blonde.

I left that party because she was there; she was always around you.

You said she had feelings for you, obvious, but you only saw her as a friend,
a little sister.

But the two of us were so different, you said,

she was bubbly and outgoing and amiable

and aren't those all synonyms for annoying?

You called me, "sullen, quiet, and brooding

and that complimented my diminutive figure so well,"

reminding me of Dream Song 171:

 "Say her small figure is heavenly & full,...

 say she is soft in speech, stately in walking,

 modest at gatherings, ..."

Were your words really like those

or was it that I carried *The Dream Songs* around all summer,

finding them first after I went to Chicago that May
carried them through a downpour so that the pages will never lie flat again?

I returned home and wrote:

*At once, too familiar
but second, rather too vague
kept quietly for another year.*

*Pressed against sweaty strangers
not as much against him
but that's what kindness becomes.*

But more than my own forgotten words, the Paul Simon I listened to each time I was in
my car:

*This are the very words she uses to describe her life
She said a good ain't got no rain
A bad day's when I lie in bed and think of what mighta been*

What mighta been still means what isn't.

Seventh Letter: Dear S,

The only time I saw you in Chicago in the winter,
the time I most needed you, we walked around Chicago
in early March and I wore an unlined wool coat because I didn't care about being warm.