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Azalea

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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College of Charleston
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2010

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Abstract

This collection of poems, with its focus on home and absence, is named for the azalea, the thinking of home bush.

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Hometown

Sacra Pinus Esto

Most of us cannot
bring ourselves back
to Cypress, where

the woman lay
like a penny on the rails.
On one side of the crossing

a rheumatology office, on the other
a church. When the conductor
stopped farther down

he said he hadn't even noticed.
Like it hadn't happened
at all. Not far off

the landlady
worked in her garden
without gloves. She lifted

the purple heart-shaped
leaves of the sweet potato
vine to cut back the stems.

There was just a short mile
gap between her house
and mine. I have trouble

understanding the difference
between the sapwood
and the heartwood, the living

and the non-living. What
I know about these women
would fit inside a thimble.

Because I know not
nearly enough: a wet road
littered with sprigs of a pine.

I first surmised the Horses' heads

I shouldn't have watched
the coroner wheel out
your body bag. I couldn't stop
myself. And John, after they left

the lights were still on
in your kitchen. I had to
stand on my toes to see
through the window.

There was a rolled up
newspaper on your table,
a single chair. I can't say
what I hoped would be there.

There was a painting
religious in nature I think,
because there was more light
than shade. I never took you

for religious. John, you walked
to and from work on the square.
On the day you passed
a judge drove you home.

His secretary hung a wreath
made of birch branches
on your door. I never noticed
your sunroom until now. Inside

a sun dried Oxford still hangs
on a clothesline. I think it
was your sister who left
your gate open. It blows

back and forth. The metal latch
strikes a wood plank
like horses' hooves:
and John and John and John.

The Angel's Share

You took a bus back home when your mother died,
waited round the oxbow for the sun to set,

sorry it wouldn't last much longer than a few minutes.
You loved how her sheets would wear out,

spread like gossamer over your feet. How many years,
three, maybe five, since you saw her last?

Always get their share, the angels. At Heaven Hill
the bottom halves of white warehouses are coated black,

a little farther out, the hickory trunks. So it goes,
just a little less bourbon in the barrels.

According to Paolo

When we read the part about falling in love
we were sitting in the park feeding pigeons.

You eyed me with considerable suspicion.
The wing of a butterfly was stuck between

two blades of grass. I leaned down and over
to free her and my mouth planted on the cleft

of yours. Minutes passed, daylight passed
and when I came to I was trembling.

Of course I never confessed this to anyone.
That day I couldn't go on reading with you.

Your fingers sink in the hollow of my hand,
my heart just barely holding out.

Once gone

outside is still
dusted yellow, an unripe pear
drops and rolls on the tin roof.

A wren chirps,
doesn't hurt, tea-kettle-tea,
to hear from you. The deaf

have one gesture
alone for independent
and rescue, to cross both palms

before your chest.
Think of it as breaking a rope
tied around your wrist.

Prelude to February

A streetlamp flickers
through our shade.

In sleep, you're still
leaving Bangladesh.

There was rain,
it never rained there.

A rickshaw-driver
held his child's umbrella

over your head.
What you gave him:

candy bars, a deck of cards.
You held his daughter

in your lap. Rainwater
pooled beneath your feet.

A bomb went off.
After a cold shower

you kiss me goodnight
for the second time. Please

don't grow any older, no
that's not right, do not grow

weary of me. *I'll go
this time.*

Aubade

When they began to unbuild Grace Bridge
we were asleep. We missed it. One splash
and then a second. The steel
and concrete dropped

into the ocean just blocks away.

When you are finally gone
I take everything to the laundry:
duvet, sheets, shams. I watch it all

tumble around in the soapy water.

I listen to Today Show chitchat: Weather
reports, the economy,
products to organize your home,

some small family tragedy.

They always throw one in.
At least three
barge loads of rubble

floated out past the shoreline.

I've come this far without understanding
why we clean up after. After an argument
you told me I was authentic

to a fault, and I said nothing. I remember
a package you sent after missing
my birthday. A wheel-thrown pitcher,
wrapped in The Times,

broken into four sharp pieces. The debris
is so like the limestone rock of their hard
bottom habitat the marine life
hardly notice a difference. They begin

to build themselves a new reef. Impossible
that the rosemary bush, the stack of paperbacks,
the plumbing, every bit of clutter around
this house, all go on without you.

Of Late

I have learned to mourn
only on the lunch hour

when things are busy.
Something about working

as a bank teller—
the repetition of counting

bills by tens, entering digits,
making small deposit after small deposit

kept me from crying. After some time
I couldn't be bothered

with it at all. I can't even
think of it as a death now.

It has been years. Only today
when a dirt dauber comes in

through a tear in the screen door
do I let myself think it: You are married

and have a child. When I was carrying yours,
you said *This will not make us be together.*

As if I thought it might. As if
I thought we weren't. Once I loved a man

who could only love me back
over the phone. I beat the wasp

again and again with a broom,
but I can't kill just one, another will hear,

and follow the hum of death.
Another black and metallic blue body

facing heavenward along the doorsill.

Culling Oysters in November

I don't mind washing away the muck
and prying them apart, it's just that today
when I find a dime-sized crab living in the gills

it has little to do with luck and all to do
with you, sleeping with someone else.
When I look to the bed, oyster knife in one hand

cluster of shells in the other. I think, maybe I should
hold off. No need to tell my sister she was right about you
all along. I sink to my ankles, and then knees

in pluff mud, cast the razor-sharp shells back
to the bank, climb back on the boat. At least until
the New Year there's no need.

What You Do

Someone has to take the time
to fill the killing jar

with sawdust soaked
in fingernail polish,

wait the right number
of minutes so the damselfly

won't resurrect itself.
Pin the body first,

spread the wings into place,
pin the wing veins. And here

we are having drinks
with your new love in a booth

lit by a red bulb. *Not anthropologist,*
she tells me, *entomologist.*

*I have a dresser drawer
full of live bugs.*

Prelude to a Kiss

One late afternoon while crossing the Buffalo
we watched a father watch his son
watch a snake on the surface of the shallows.
The snake threw its coils
from side to side, the water wavelike
around its flattened belly. I mention this
only because we all knew then
the snake would
rather flee than strike.

Back at camp, you bent beside
the fire, your breath devout and vigorous.
Sparks and smut and ash blew past and into
my hair. You stood frowning, removing
a glove. You brushed the ash away
with the tips of your bare fingers.
You always loved campfire.
The next site over, a woman slept
alone in a two-tent.

Homesick

Because a girl from school.
Because she ran away from home.
Because she lived for at least a year
stapled to the trunk of a Magnolia.
Because I have no way of knowing.
Because my grandfather could not
wait for his son. Because he cut
his hand cleaning the rain gutters.
Because once I dreamt of a friend
falling into a grey ocean wearing
a winter coat and boots. Because
she was tangled in the lines
of a parachute. Because a poet
told me to write when I have
no news at all. Because an old barn.
Because I fell asleep on the drive
home. Because an elk crossing.
Because I have not been lonely
enough. Because the youngest
people I know live in the oldest
houses. Because the fresh market.
Because a mother grabbed her son
by the wrist. Because not the hand.
Because my own mother. Because
she has left & come back. Left & came
back. Because I can settle on nothing.
Because I loved an Italian on a train.
Because the Last Supper hammered
in tin. Because my grandparents'
dining room. No because of their yard.
Because the Spanish Moss. Because
sharks' teeth. Because more or less
the ocean & loves & deaths.
Because bees. Because. Because.
Because the honey stomach weighs
almost as much as the bee itself.

Folly River Landing, Early Summer

Even after I watched
the dockworker

lift him from the chair,
even after I knew

the rudder pedals
would be useless to him,

even after we both paddled
with the current

to a half-sunk ship,
even after we beached,

watched two dolphin fins
breach the water's surface,

even after he called them closer,
beat the side of his vessel,

I lifted my body out
of the kayak, almost

ashamed that I could.

After Caravaggio

David: barefaced,
one shoulder sun-struck,

arm outstretched
the filth-rimmed nails

lift the beetle-browed head
out of the shadows

by a fistful of hair.
Goliath: Bearded,

eyes hooded, heavy-lidded
as if unslept, dead-mouthed

as if, without hope or fear,
to say: I know what I have been.

Some Distance

A Nautical Mile seems lonely, doesn't it?
One schooner sailing along one measure
of arc along a meridian, a sea mile. *Meile*
the distance one could walk alone
in an hour, if no one gets in the way. Thou,
one one thousandth of an inch. Too close to
far away from. Two boroughs over
a Manhattan distance, city blocks,
taxicab geometry. We'll never find each other
will we? Not on any alleyway. On a King's Graph,
chessboard distance, the number of moves
from one square to another. A beard-second.
Arm's, car, horse, Hubble lengths away,
Oh, the way we are, so long.

The Fortune Teller

after Thomas Wilmer Dewing

Start with the cup of her hand,
long-sleeved arms

curved as a bow.
shoulders, throat, chin

—bare, the slight arc of
candle or lamp or firelight.

On her altar cards
laid out like laundry.

Her skirt, a towel
I saw washed up

on a beach once.
The other woman now,

being read, slumped,
a pall cast over

a an egg-shaped
vase. Her eyes, the way

dandelions might burn
and one fine-boned hand

placed on the table,
a river-pitted palm, face-up.

Postcard from Boston

Dear Friend, what reason is there
to unlove you now?

I am on my way to the museum

where you sent me to find

Corot's Dante.

I thank you beyond believing.

The *T* departs and my ankle

won't hold. Forget math,
the poet says, algebra is a reunion

of broken parts. On Hanover a surgeon

can quote just enough,
passes a plate of porcini mushrooms:

Ho io grazie grandi apo te?

I am better off
to hate him, to question the poet,

better to forget your painter's hands,
your short, quick strokes,
your disheveled parts.

To Terezin and Back

for my guide, Pavel

After the yard of roses beneath the gate
he stops to say, *this work makes me free.*

Only a nurse he saw before boarding, only
this piece of track, only his wife's name

broadcast over the radio, could bring him back
to walk the perimeter of the star-shaped fortress

each day. *A museum could never be
reason enough.*

Travelling to Charleston with Dido

Whenever I'm not with him
is a waste of time, on the airplane
coming home, I trace her name,

the answer to a crossword, over
and over again. She speaks Italian,
the way angels must, *amor*

ch'a nullo amato amar perdona.
Who cares about him now, who cares?
Ink whirls as the black tipped wings of cranes.

What I would not do to walk St. Phillip's
free from his shade, my skin burning,
to pray, but love begs no one's pardon.

Don't cry over this, you idiot. The plane
will land, with all the cargo, her name
scavenged by some cruciverbalist.

Departure

On the first afternoon in weeks
without a thunderstorm

my father and I sit on the porch
admiring his handiwork, a hummingbird feeder

made from a Blanton's bottle,
hung from the limb of an infected Magnolia,

the leaves riddled with holes,
each hole with a yellow halo.

I am always planning his funeral in my head.
Our small town, the too late blooms

of azaleas, the sandy ground,
things I could easily leave behind

if I knew he'd stay with me forever
in my childhood room.

The hardwood floors, my unfinished
drawing of a fawn on chipboard,

the walls he painted pink
are just now beginning to crack.

When he goes out to walk the dog
I leave without even saying goodbye.

And because it was too heavy,
because he wasn't home to help me,

because like him I have little patience
I shoved my suitcase down the stairs,

where it hits the wall
and leaves behind black scratch marks.

When I call him from the airport
to tell him what I've done, he says

I knew it was you, call when you land.

Homecoming

It's nighttime here and people are at work
in the azaleas. A man in a suit wheels out
an empty gurney. Our mothers
seem not to even notice,

yours waits in a car, fiddles with the radio,
she doesn't even look at me, mine stands
at the edge of an ivy desert
with a hose in her hand.

You can't hear me gasp as you slap
my hand away, do you even remember
you did that? There is no slam
from the car door, no rev

of the engine as you drive off. I stand there
in the dark, until the garden tools are stashed away,
no one left at work around.
You have been gone long enough.

Postlude

A few years after your death, I saw your mother shopping,
her basket filled to the brim with onions and collards,

angry at you for leaving her. She always talked too much.
She pulled out her address book overflowing with receipt paper,

coupons, scraps of scripture and newspaper. She said you kept it
on your dresser mirror, a photograph of us, I don't remember taking,

sitting on a courting board. What did you say to make me
make that face? You always poked at me. I was pushing you away.

Far away now. One problem with death, you'll always be a boy
who shoved me from a trestle, and after a dog wrapped its chain

around my knees, carried me home.

Prelude to a Break-Up

Last spring when we drove through Montana,
he'd hit a cat with the car. I'd fallen asleep in the back

while the two of you argued whether or not to get out,
fumble in the trunk for a hammer, in the end you decided

it would make too much noise, you didn't want to wake me.
I still remember the two of you, how he regained control

of the wheel crossing the Continental Divide, the black ice,
you placed a hand on his knee. Back at your place

we took careful steps through the pathway covered in fresh snow
to your door, where the dog waited, breathing clouds onto the pane.

Memento Park, Hungary

On the Buda side the gypsies have no one left
to steal from. They burn trash at night, sending
yellow smoke into the subway. They leave handprints

on the tiled walls to show they belong
to this city. The streets are flooding. We are
locked out of our apartment. When it rains

here your feet weigh nothing. We climb a gate
to drink straight from a bottle of wine,
beneath the bronze boots of Stalin.

Charrette

The term for the late night rush to finish a project.

Falling, as in to a muck-filled lake, as in
from ballast. As in from a star, a rock.
As in a lime-leaf. As in behind. Come January,
worse for the wear. As in boots or a cliff road.
If you were me, it's not if, but when, as in first frost,
ferns. When the dead are whisked away.
Not as in batter. Nor dancers ready for flight
to and from one another. Flight as in the feather
of an arrow. As in of starlings. As in stairs,
a way. How to say this— Hold on, as in cradle,
as in to harvest, as in grain, sheaves of.
Bundles to reap, bound before threshing, as in
separation. As in flocking from reed beds,
the roost in marshland, none want to be on the outside.
To take wing, a murmuration, to waste no time.

Prelude to Relapse

I try to imagine how I would hold up a year from now,
ten years from now. Maybe I'm back on the east coast,
sun low in the sky. Sun falls in every corner of a place,

when you are well. When you are not, well let's just say
it's dark. Did I tell you about Calder and his kinetic mobiles?
How at first, they were frail affairs of wires and struts,

each element able to come and go in its relationship
with others. Later he developed the earthbound *stabile*
and while the aluminum panes still had a nervous

sort of quiver, they were no longer hanging in the wind.

Prelude to Shellfire

How it was one night I sat on a curb.
How across from The Battery. How oyster shells
bleached, spread out along the seawall. How to protect

what the surf would think nothing of washing away.
How we met: a cousin of mine, how he lied. How he
called you a thief. How he said he'd never stolen

a thing, how from my father: a saw, a gun, a watch.
How my father found him, spread out like a crucifix,
how on a motel room floor he lit and put out cigarettes

on the tiles. How I hate this. How one of us holds up,
a church has one steeple, how the other won't. How still,
the remains of a brick chimney, how they got that way.

And So The Trojans Buried Hector, Breaker Of Horses.

I can't imagine what you're doing
to your body now. When my students

and I read the bit about Hector's body
how the God's saved the skin

with ambrosia & juniper, I pray
they save yours too, like the hull

of an old ship they coat you with oil
from an olive tree. When my students

ask why I'm crying, I don't say because
we all know how this ends, spared

a few spear marks, but how sad to know
how ungodlike we are, how sad to know

there are still within you ten thousand
unbroken horses.

To Zion

*Be careful of words like "never" or "always"
when talking about yourself or someone else.
Advice for Anger Management*

Never mind the French restaurant
off Broad Street where I'd given up last,
he always comes back, doesn't he?
Don't mind that I've been worried
for days where he's been, that morning
he called from a bus stop, drunk still,
washing machine running loose, knocking
side to side, never mind the broken coffee pot.
Just to keep anger at bay I set off for the skyline
of Zurich, pierced by a blue spire above
a clock tower, through a door to a choir
of an abbey. A trumpet sounds (I am younger
and alone) from Chagall's yellow heavens.

La Vie en rose

This time you've been gone for days.
A city's worth of overgrown ruins—your
history, so unlike mine. O, darling,

never give your heart outright. With
a piece of wire I rig the prickled
rose bush stem between the porch

beam and posts. You know, there is a God
of Silence, he makes a soup of rose hips,
spoon-feeds you with one hand and with the other

presses a finger to his lips. By nightfall love
fastens itself to my temples. On my nightstand
a shrine: Advil, reading glasses, peppermint oil.

On the street a man half hums, half sings
Édith Piaf. All I can think, why in secret
they drove her black-clad body back to Paris.

Black Swan Theory

When the phrase was coined, the black swan was presumed not to exist. In January of 2010 experts were surprised after witnessing a rare "divorce" between a pair of swans at a wildfowl sanctuary.

Not holding vigil at the nest,
not widowed, not going without

food for days, nor baying
like an old hound, but crooning,

each wing beat toward new loves,
not knowing each other, overwintering

in the same brackish waters, same small
corner of lake, where they'd both been.

Four thousand pairs in four decades
stayed together, as long as, they weren't dying.

A small number of Black Swans
explains almost all of our world. All their

feathers must be white, no longer,
as we are no longer. Taleb would have

argued, *perfection*, how I'd undone myself,
unexpected enough, cause enough, as it happens.

A Mensa et Thoro

for my sister

Half-asleep the morning near gone
you say *separation*

from him, from bed-and-board,
from hipbone. For the time being

we watch the ground-nesting heron
from the edge of the dock

gathering salt grass from abandoned nests
the delicate weaving

of moss, reeds, mangrove leaves.
For days they build

and when the season comes to an end
they leave the rookeries

of blackwater swamps to find another.
All birds have hollow bones,

don't think about it too much. The garage
emptied, the broken drawer,

the newborn grief. I cannot be with you.
I cannot stop myself

from thinking of your wedding gown,
knotting the ribbons of your bustle,

not knowing what to make of this
untying.

She Owes Him That

After her divorce
she decided to take up belly dancing,
bought a convertible, dated around,
dyed her hair blonde,

then red, then brown, and
then she cut it all off, because
that's what women do sometimes.
She thinks it could be worse

while she waits
in the Office of Human Concern.
She could be lonelier and anyway
there's no shame

in being lonely. The snip
of the scissor blades: there's always
another woman involved. At night
when she brushes her teeth

before bed she remembers
he said he didn't want to die alone.
The truth was she didn't miss him
not even a smidge.

The Last Night My Parents Slept Under One Roof

Someone said
when it comes

*it will sound like knives,
the eye forty miles wide.*

I remember not knowing
what that meant, *the eye*.

My father lit kerosene lamps
where we all hovered.

Paw Roy couldn't sleep.
He was up and down

all night. We all wanted
to sleep through it.

When Hugo made landfall
I was in his leather lazy-boy.

I covered my head with an afghan,
it was hot, there was a crack

of pine, my mother's howl
as a limb struck the house.

Shuck

I love to watch her working in the kitchen,
pulling back the tough inedible husks

from an ear of sweet corn, the dry brown silk,
discarding the root end under the running faucet.

Read me a poem, she says, opening one cabinet,
and then another, pulling from under many pots

a roasting pan. *Something about mothers and daughters
that isn't sad*. Her hair pulled back in a lazy bun,

a dishrag handy, her rings set by the sink, my inheritance:
her face turning bright with left-over anger

when I say *I don't know any like that*.

Palmetto Bug

When I first learned they could fly
I was in a canning room of our garage.
It was just about evening, a slice of sun

glint on the metal of hammers
and screwdrivers hanging on the wall,
I reached for what I came for, a spoke wrench

for my father to fix a buckled bicycle wheel,
I knocked over a box of nails when I felt
the flit of wings, like brittle copper in my hand.

When I ran screaming from the garage
to the yard tussling my hair my father
let out a gruff laugh, took a swig of Kalik.

With Permission

When I can't get to sleep
I think of my sister before we were living
states apart back when we were
sharing a bedroom.

I think of her spine, how it curved
like a question mark, the brace she slept in at night,
how it worked its way through skin, muscles, ribs,
joints. What torture that must've been.

I think of my mother, how she must have felt
changing her newborn's diaper, noticing what only
a mother could. I think of my mother carrying her infant
through the Piggly Wiggly when the cast foot slips

from the swaddle, what the cashier
must have thought. My sister wore the brace just so
nothing would become worse, but it never really worked
as the doctor would have liked.

I think of the doctor, who kept the amputated foot
of a child in his freezer until it went on the fritz,
how he placed the foot in a crab trap, dropped it
to the bottom of the bay,

how he said he had permission
when the foot washed up on Sullivan's Island.

Doctrine: Handgun

God created man, but Sam Colt made them equal.

Near the falls

on the only river here that flows south
to north, two teenagers
propped up against a shortleaf pine.

The boy's hand held

the grip of a pistol. When he set the gun
on the rock to dive feet first into the plunge pool
you wouldn't have believed

how the sun shot off

the holster's buckles straight into the girl's
eyes. I thought she might go blind. On the drive
home slapped to the back of a big rig,

I saw a sticker that read

I've come this far by faith. I'd like
to know how far that was. Upstream
the Kings River cuts gorges in shale.

The headwaters

flow nearly a hundred miles from there.
When I was eleven a .45 colt was stolen
from my father's closet by the son of a man

who painted our shutters the color of rust

If I sleep in daylight hours I dream of him standing
in the dusk of a river, clasping his hands around
the handle as if to pray, you can't

with a handgun, you can't hope to hit

anything more than fifty yards away.
I've always said I hate guns, but the truth is
I am afraid of how their holders love them.

A Conversation

You ask if I have any ideas
about Heaven. I don't want

to answer, but study
instead what isn't hidden
by your sleeves: the sketch of Dali's,

the thin ribs. The rooster,
the once deep green ink
of the feathers faded.

You gave me a book. In the margins
you have penciled *I see hope*
in the ending, but it is not,

like anything, promised.

There are angels
in Heaven that have been eating peaches

off some mighty fine trees. They have
no bodies whatsoever,
no wings and unlike men

they do not vacillate back and forth—
they see everything
to its logical conclusion.

They speak within you,
not with you, not confused
by any labor

of language. I want to believe
our old hurt will be tidied away,
swept up with plaster dust.

I don't have any idea
about the carpentry of Heaven,
but think of it in terms of the undone.

Le Stelle

Let's pray everything goes smoothly
on the Moon. No bootprints, no dust to settle.

I won't pray for you to come back
anymore. Do you know how much
I've loved you? As much as, sifted through
a colander, all of the stars.