

Spring 2019

Beyond the Limits of Sight

Catherine Ntube

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ntube, C.(2019). *Beyond the Limits of Sight*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5203>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SIGHT

by

Catherine Ntube

Bachelor of Arts
Harvard University, 2011

Master of Arts
Relay Graduate School of Education, 2014

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2019

Accepted by:

Nikky Finney, Director of Thesis

Liz Countryman, Reader

Eli Jelly-Schapiro, Reader

Nancy Tolson, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Catherine Ntube, 2019
All Rights Reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I submit this thesis with deep and lasting gratitude to the poetry faculty at the University of South Carolina: Sam Amadon, Liz Countryman, Fred Dings, and Nikky Finney; to the English and Af-Am faculty readers on my thesis committee: Eli Jelly-Schapiro and Nancy Tolson; and to all of my poet peers, my cohort in particular: Lauren Clark, Carlos Gomez-Marquez, and Joy Priest. Thank you for your attention and insight, your thoughts and your time.

ABSTRACT

Beyond the Limits of Sight is a collection of poems exploring black diasporic identity through and beyond the silences that come to surround violence. In this experimental collection, black bars representing selective silence appear throughout the work, in protest of the compulsory release of licensing rights to the university and its corporate partners as a degree requirement, and in insistence that the poet be able to decide on what terms and via which platforms their voice enters the public sphere.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
facing the failure of a cast spell	1
james byrd jr. is murdered a few hours away and [REDACTED]	2
what i know at birth / what i know [REDACTED]	3
force. field.....	4
in the house of [REDACTED]	6
[REDACTED] wars against [REDACTED]	7
famine comes in waves and i think of [REDACTED] in the tide.....	8
imagining [REDACTED] <i>things fall apart</i>	9
in the house of [REDACTED]	10
what i know [REDACTED] what [REDACTED] follows	11
in the house of [REDACTED]	12
upon imagining the origin [REDACTED] of my name	13
I call [REDACTED] haunted and mean to [REDACTED]	14
forcefield.....	16
imagining [REDACTED] <i>things fall apart</i>	17
a catalogue of colors to describe [REDACTED]	20
[unsent letters [REDACTED]]	21

[little pockets of quiet]	22
[visions on a horizontal axis]	25
[the color of my knuckles]	26
[sphering the mirror]	28
[otis]	30
there are so many ways to keep [redacted] quiet (and as many ways to [redacted])	32
i'm unfolding my childhood again, convinced it's a map i haven't read right, convinced there's [redacted]	34
lessons i like to think [redacted] with the gift of a pet rock, the lion king band-aid on top [redacted]	35
the moon is curved and [redacted], and i am skilled in its shape	36
boko haram abducted more schoolgirls. [redacted]	40
in which love is a practice of [redacted] under the gaze of a racist state	42
in which [redacted] the small god of perseverance	43
[redacted] is gentle before he knows it.....	44
the world according to [redacted]	45
improvisations on versions of what we've been, [redacted]	46
in which [redacted] humbles the sky	48
in which i refract the inherited world to [redacted]	49
sometimes i try to [redacted] before i could spell violence	51

*People are trapped in history
and history is trapped in them.*

—James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*

facing the failure of a cast spell

In the only photograph [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the eyes of a goat,
make flat black cliffs of his pupils
with my pen. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
has a flattened field of vision,
a near complete view
of the savanna on the horizon,
[REDACTED] in front of
and behind himself,
where my [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].
When I speak to him, then,
my voice is [REDACTED],
descending from [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. I tell him

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Later, when he calls me,
asks after [REDACTED],
this message is still lodged
[REDACTED]
for the tongue's hammer
to send it resounding again
into open space. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].
I blink. The mouth's muscle [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] fenced by my teeth.

james byrd jr. is murdered a few hours away and [REDACTED]

Texas, 1998

News says they drug him behind a truck
until [REDACTED],
and to them that made him [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] seethes, kicking at dirt

and weighing a helpless curse on his tongue.
Their way of seeing [REDACTED] a threat
that lingers fresh and [REDACTED]
as [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] years old and molted [REDACTED],
[REDACTED], wobble,
wrap my palms around the [REDACTED]
that straddle my shoulders, find [REDACTED]

[REDACTED], twist the chains above me
until the swing's pull [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. Head thrown back, legs flailing,
I am a blur of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED],

the world turned to wind, flashes of light,
something like [REDACTED].

what i know at birth / what i know [REDACTED]

Mother births a [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
as the [REDACTED] ascend
to fame in [REDACTED] / Mother births a [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] minutes from where she
might one day be beaten for visiting—her
audacity to picnic in—[REDACTED] /
Mother births a [REDACTED] the year five
white men beat brown-skinned strangers for
being near *their* park / Mother births a
[REDACTED] the year five men with
[REDACTED] beat brown-skinned
strangers for being / Mother births a [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] into being / Mother births a [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] while [REDACTED] past a park
named after a Confederate general / Mother
births [REDACTED] from [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] /
Mother births [REDACTED] who doesn't
scream / Mother births [REDACTED]
and worries [REDACTED] /
Mother births [REDACTED] whose heart
beats / Mother births [REDACTED]
while [REDACTED] / Mother
births [REDACTED] who police think a
[REDACTED] /
Mother births [REDACTED] whose
suspicious being has a [REDACTED] waiting /
Mother births a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] / Mother
births a [REDACTED] without changing
[REDACTED] / Mother births a [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] in a country that never [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

force. field.

██████████ held a double-edged straight blade
between his index finger and thumb
while he ██████████,

██████████, *making myself sick.* the same tool,
in the same hands, ██████████,
and i couldn't stop it—██████████,

██████████ of my skin.
██████████ years old, ██████████, flushed
with adrenaline, how could i ██████████

██████████: the wildflowers and weeds
in the vacant lot had pollen enough
to ██████████, and still, ██████████,

most of all the blooms that were red-edged
and yellowed at the center. near a patch of these
lied a discarded pallet, ██████████

██████████. shading this trash was a stout tree
with a thick branch i perched on to read,
one leg dangling against the trunk,

one knee tucked to my chest, my toes wiggling
on the tree bark. a healthy tree ██████████.
the dead wood ██████████

in the instep of my foot as i walked back
██████████. i was trying to ignore it,
waiting for ██████████.

██████████ be softer, wouldn't scold

or [REDACTED],
[REDACTED] peroxide and [REDACTED]

on the wound. [REDACTED] i'd kept it secret,
[REDACTED]. he said the [REDACTED] would help
[REDACTED] the wood, it wouldn't [REDACTED],

and how else [REDACTED] believe [REDACTED],
didn't trust [REDACTED] to be [REDACTED],
though i [REDACTED] them, though i hadn't seen them

[REDACTED]
i *knew*. what else could i do. i [REDACTED],
held my [REDACTED].

in the house of [REDACTED]

We're twins at the edge of [REDACTED],
brush grown thick and [REDACTED].
Branches scratch and pick at our calves
as we enter. Above us, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. Ahead, a light suggests
we might not be alone. [REDACTED]
of the forest until we are weak with hunger,
need-driven toward the [REDACTED]:
a mud house with its inner walls kiln-bright,
no electricity, no fire, [REDACTED]. In the center
of its one room, [REDACTED]— a man's head
[REDACTED], a small trail of smoke
from [REDACTED]
mid-stomp above the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. [REDACTED] grasps at smoke, touches
the statue's top lip, [REDACTED]
at the [REDACTED] on the tips of his [REDACTED].
After [REDACTED] that morning, my
[REDACTED] tells him he snores like [REDACTED]. I
watch his [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

famine comes in waves and i think of [REDACTED] in the tide
south sudan, 1993; yemen, 2018

A vulture loomed over a famished child
the year [REDACTED], and the image flooded the news
for days, [REDACTED] her jutting [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] ripples in her skin.

For a moment, the moneyed world was [REDACTED]. I am told
at that age I [REDACTED],
appearing quiet and sudden in his line of sight—

my fingers poking under [REDACTED],
a crown of curls [REDACTED] swaying field,
the arcs of my [REDACTED] the top edge
of a [REDACTED]. He'd palm his [REDACTED].

I didn't know, [REDACTED], that each rib
has its own [REDACTED]
onto a lower plane. Today, on my computer screen,

[REDACTED] sit unnamed and unspeaking, bronze
skin taut [REDACTED]. They too
will reach the limits of sight, [REDACTED]
into the [REDACTED],

abstraction, [REDACTED] unabated
into the [REDACTED] and profit.
Children appear [REDACTED]

on the earth's surface, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] obscures reflection, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] that grip [REDACTED].

imagining [REDACTED] *things fall apart*

Fresh [REDACTED] the ground flat. No [REDACTED]
of his [REDACTED] house. Nightly, he kneels to [REDACTED]
of time. It's never a soft descent, no [REDACTED]
to catch him, the [REDACTED] curling across the sky: [REDACTED]

in this American city. [REDACTED] cause a constant [REDACTED]
behind his eyes, the past [REDACTED] to save,
the decades of ash and [REDACTED] piling up to coat
his [REDACTED], blur his [REDACTED], overwhelm his [REDACTED].

He [REDACTED] in the language [REDACTED],
attends mass [REDACTED]
coast [REDACTED]. He reads
notes from home like a [REDACTED], convinced [REDACTED]

is inside, something [REDACTED]. How is it that
[REDACTED] how he remembers it, the [REDACTED] on his clasped hands
[REDACTED] his veins and [REDACTED] his bones.

in the house of [REDACTED]

We're twins again at the edge of [REDACTED],
our hands [REDACTED],
the moon and stars caught behind clouds in
the sky. We refuse to enter [REDACTED],
sit stubborn on lookout in a small clearing,
leaning [REDACTED]. The sun
emerges, soars slowly to its peak, a bird lands
at my feet and suddenly we are [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and hide our faces [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] tower around us, climb
higher and higher toward the sun above our
heads. When the walls cool to clay, we crane
our necks to see where they end, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the skyline. Sweat cools on my
skin and several moments pass [REDACTED]
the figure in the corner—a clay bird, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], wings [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] like bowls on the ground beside it.
Tears well up and I am on my bedroom floor,
[REDACTED]
worried footsteps tiptoeing from the hallway.

what i know [redacted] | ~~what~~ [redacted] ~~follows~~

[redacted] is doorway tall. [redacted] can be heard through walls. [redacted] bedtime songs. [redacted] home when [redacted]. [redacted] in the hospital. [redacted] cooks [redacted] fists [redacted] and the [redacted] like sun through gauze curtains. [redacted]. [redacted] blanket warm. [redacted] hair knots downy [redacted] on his chest. [redacted]-drum- and pillow-chested. ~~Doctors~~ [redacted]. [redacted] says [redacted] during breakfast. [redacted] says *love you* when [redacted]. [redacted] says *love you too*.

•

*Jesus loves me this I know [redacted].
For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong.
[redacted]. They are weak but
He is strong.*

•

Apple. Boy. Cat. Dog. [redacted]. Girl.
Hat. [redacted]. Kite. Lamp. Mother. Nest.
Ocean. Pig. Queen. Rabbit. [redacted].
Unicorn. [redacted]. Xylophone. Yak. Zebra.

•

[redacted]

[redacted] *strong*

in the house of [REDACTED]

give [REDACTED] honeysuckle
[REDACTED] and make us sweet
[REDACTED], amen

we twins at the limits of [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
discover a shallow stream to drink from,	scrub our faces
our backs turned to the glowing house	[REDACTED]
–red walls [REDACTED] trees. we are	trying to make
good this time. [REDACTED]. we have learned	[REDACTED] anew,
and we're ready to send our dripping hands	working steadily
into dirt. we dig [REDACTED],	until finally we
[REDACTED]. we lift our arms	(clay - colored)
to briefly rest [REDACTED]. we	have a vision
must race the rising sun to become statues	of [REDACTED],
of each other: him, sitting cross-legged	sore, but calm,
in the trench, [REDACTED]	unlike [REDACTED]:
i am [REDACTED], his fingers tucked	
in the winged nooks [REDACTED]	a gentle presence
[REDACTED]. the two of us	our [REDACTED] a sight
at sun's crest: fired ceramic, rendered [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

upon imagining the origin [REDACTED] of my name

On the first day of [REDACTED] week,
I draw a bath and [REDACTED]
emerges chin first, seizing, a sudden slosh in rising tide,
[REDACTED] flinging soap on my face.
I press one palm [REDACTED] with the other,
whisper our name [REDACTED],

carob fingers on porcelain tub, [REDACTED]
above sudsy water. [REDACTED] a tar hollow, no teeth
or tongue, but we share [REDACTED]
and I [REDACTED] having ever met.
I turn off the faucet [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] that binds us,

so I mirror her silence, try to make sense
of her dancing jaw. Earnest, she points [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a palmful of water. I refuse to drink.
She points [REDACTED],
forearm trembling. [REDACTED], grasp her hand,
reach [REDACTED]. I want to say [REDACTED]

I need to tend to. [REDACTED], but it feels [REDACTED]
and might make me a liar, so there's only [REDACTED],
the [REDACTED] rushing at her wrinkled feet. I [REDACTED] as she wilts,
[REDACTED], limbs curling [REDACTED]. I untangle
[REDACTED], pull my hand from the nook of her chest and chin,
sit silent for hours [REDACTED], wake to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

i call ██████████ haunted and mean to ██████████
Virginia, 2017

Having never seen ██████████ before,
besides the pictures conjured ██████████,
her sweeping arms—

██████████
████████████████████
██████████—

I'm a stranger in my own mind today,
and in my feet, unsteadily shouldering
what ██████████. This isn't the place

she romped as a child, ██████████,
muddying her ██████████. Neither is
the warped image ██████████,

the house more ██████████, the kitchen ██████████,
the land less flat ██████████.
The ██████████ has been demolished

down to a concrete slab, so she might
have seen ██████████ as a chimney,
instead of the ██████████

it seems to me, now. She's trying to refresh
her memory, imagine things before business
██████████, before

tools were sold off and the nearest neighbor's
██████████. Fresh in my heart
is the single tombstone ██████████

in the town graveyard, the balcony built for

██████████ at the local church,
for ██████████.

I'm walking where the roses were, the thorns,
and ██████████ before them, feeling how
entangled I am, and how inevitable,

how expansive the wreckage of ██████████,
how layered the sense of ██████████, here,
in the ██████████, and in the ██████████.

forcefield

the skin behind his [REDACTED] [REDACTED]—
is a place i wouldn't know i'd touched
but for a picture in which [REDACTED],
scared of something [REDACTED],
has her palm and forehead pressed
to the [REDACTED].

imagining [redacted] *things fall apart*

[redacted] eyes gloss
[redacted] with age, he [redacted]
[redacted] the road, faces near
[redacted] and far away.

At night he dreams
[redacted] of [redacted]. He wakes,
takes solace in the blur
[redacted] that replaces

his memory,
[redacted]: its keen borders
and corners softened.
[redacted] His body

[redacted]
[redacted]
he stumbles down, [redacted]
[redacted] into himself,

emerging
[redacted] a wavering [redacted]
in [redacted]:
[redacted] little [redacted]

[redacted] mouth
[redacted] curled around a village rhyme,
tempo set with rhythmic
[redacted].

one hand turning [redacted] pages,
one arm rocking his [redacted].

His vision
[redacted] of self whirls and stirs, turns
[redacted] in monochrome,
[redacted] murky

tiles rotating
around [redacted]
[redacted]: the small dirt hills
over his
[redacted];
[redacted] ankles,
waist-bent body
triangling from palm tree
[redacted];
the black loafers he wore
to [redacted] reviews;
the wooden tray
[redacted]
for shea and [redacted]
[redacted] cream; the gleaming
walnut desk
never retrieved
from layaway at Sears;
the camera he [redacted]
[redacted],
four rolls of
undeveloped film in his
top-right drawer; his Year 1 [redacted];
his first
composition book;
a small black cat
named [redacted].
Gone too:
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted];
[redacted]
[redacted].
[redacted]

is all he sees,

most mornings, blurry-eyed,
solitary, shaving
by memory,

██████████
██████████
scraping slowly ██████████.

He keeps
his ██████████ private.
The ██████████ he would
utter darkness to
is likewise ██████████.

a catalogue of colors to describe [REDACTED]

the inside of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], the glare of the sun
[REDACTED] when [REDACTED] in summer,
the small black beak of a mourning dove,
the [REDACTED] of limestone
and the [REDACTED],
the pointed purple tongues
in skullcap blossoms, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], creek mud's
pale [REDACTED],
the roped leaves of a [REDACTED],
the pink-stunned [REDACTED] of a springtime
[REDACTED], the [REDACTED] candle
in a [REDACTED] room when i [REDACTED]

[unsent letters ██████████]

[little pockets of quiet]

~ 1 ~

I walked [REDACTED],
and found a [REDACTED] on the doorstep

of my office building. I thought this an [REDACTED],
and entered, still. Did it surprise you, too,
how early dusk fell? I remember where

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

5-5-7 all clear. Being the one who left, this time,
I have a sense of [REDACTED]
If it bothers you [REDACTED]

you do not say. We are alike in this way,
[REDACTED]. If the [REDACTED],

I couldn't see them. I saw no blood,
no signs of choking [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] peering from the shrubs.

Actually, in your city, dusk is just falling,
bars of shadow [REDACTED]

stretching across the [REDACTED]. Your shadow
will run parallel to the bars, no matter [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. [REDACTED].

I learned this at eleven, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. There was so little I could [REDACTED].

There is so little, still. The small circle you will walk tonight is [REDACTED].

It may feel bigger. You've [REDACTED] in your legs, lost length in your gait, your knees

[REDACTED]. I can [REDACTED] than I choose to: I could [REDACTED] and I won't. We are alike in this way, and we will be tomorrow.

~ 2 ~

I saw an article today that I wanted to show you, about [REDACTED]

From what I've gathered, yours is a culture in which [REDACTED] is boasted, [REDACTED] a toxin kept to oneself. I can appreciate [REDACTED]

as a protective impulse I haven't developed. I might be happier if I had. Lately, I haven't been able to [REDACTED] without [REDACTED], or wanting to. There's a [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I've grown less able to quiet. There's a [REDACTED] we have, a heat [REDACTED] behind my [REDACTED]. Listen. You've said

your people were [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
I read this article and wondered [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
thinking it now, for the first time, the latter.

~ 3 ~

I once found [REDACTED] in your backyard, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
in a skillet on the stove. To my knowledge,

[REDACTED] there were strange men
[REDACTED]

or both. No one spoke to clarify and I [REDACTED]
as I [REDACTED]. Are we alike in this way?

I think I [REDACTED] sometimes. Goats,
I have read, sound like [REDACTED]
so they can be harder to kill. Fresh off the animal,

the skin is [REDACTED] sunlight
through the thickest parts. [REDACTED]

harder to handle. Having [REDACTED]
you know an animal's [REDACTED]

to tan its own hide. The body is [REDACTED]
at its own [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] are made,
and we cannot [REDACTED]. There's a [REDACTED]

as they bubble up, little [REDACTED]. Last month,
I learned [REDACTED] I still haven't heard

you say it. I think [REDACTED]
on [REDACTED]. It might help if you let them
[REDACTED] We are alike in this way:

[REDACTED]. Dusk has fallen,
there is no [REDACTED]

and failed. Did I tell you yet that [REDACTED]
when I open my mouth in public. Do you know
what this is. I'm not looking for [REDACTED],

just something [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] between us.

[visions on a horizontal axis]

There's a spot that appears in my vision sometimes,
a dark mark [redacted],
[redacted]
always sudden, always washed
with [redacted].

I think once I caught a sense of its shape:

a [redacted],
hips low, bent at the waist.

Can you imagine
you said of [redacted], *running*, [redacted]
[redacted] *being* [redacted]?

I sat quiet [redacted] the phone.

I might have said that goats are used
to [redacted], thousands rented out
each summer to graze, [redacted]
[redacted]. I imagine they have done
what they could this year, everything in their control.

I can't imagine [redacted],
not like you can: [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] memories [redacted]

There's a spot in my vision sometimes, brief moments
when my focus collapses flat as a [redacted], narrow as [redacted],
on a mark in my line of sight—

evanesced, always,
at the moment of recognition. Over and over [redacted]
and flattens, my [redacted]—
[redacted], [redacted], [redacted]—
unable to [redacted].

[the color of my knuckles]

~ 1 ~

I still have the photos you gave me [REDACTED].
The mystery [REDACTED] a constant, not knowing
[REDACTED].
I am thinking now of the mystery of the gift itself:

these are your only copies. I'm unsure if I should call you
unsentimental or generous. It rained all afternoon today,
the sun shining only in pockets. I caught a glimpse
[REDACTED], blurred by water,

and turned away before [REDACTED]. The brain
fills gaps in vision to make sense—some of my gaps
are constant. I caught a glimpse of someone in a window,
and couldn't place her. [REDACTED]

There's a spot at the top of my head where

[REDACTED]

The curls there grow more tangled. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

and it's itching as I study [REDACTED]

the ground is the color of [REDACTED].

The sky: the shade of [REDACTED]. I am of the place

[REDACTED]. From any other

[REDACTED], I couldn't tell it apart. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

Do you catch [REDACTED] sometimes

or is [REDACTED] more constant? On the back of each [REDACTED]

is a name and date of death. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

If you are sadder than I am [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. You might have given me [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] my hands.

[sphering the mirror]

My knowledge of [REDACTED] so flat
and quiet, so stuck in paper's pulp,

photographs and books, what ink
I've scanned in search of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I saw her
in a news report, displacing the poor

for oil money in the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] robbed [REDACTED].
I fear there is more violence [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] anger so hungry to burn
it never yields.

Tell me what it was like to find [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Did you recognize him?

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] did that make a difference?

The world is a mess
and I [REDACTED]

constantly flattening to be [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], to be justified

by the [REDACTED]. I have wanted

too much [REDACTED]. I think guilt gets

so [REDACTED], it never heals. I think
you might get this: I have [REDACTED]

and would like to be less. Let me start
with a spherical view of myself. Let me start

by admitting I could [REDACTED].

[otis]

I heard Otis Redding singing today. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. I think him in some ways [REDACTED]:
[REDACTED].

I once watched you listen to an Otis song,
restarting four times before you let it [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] So perfect

his expression of yearning that just four seconds
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

Does that make sense? I got it then, the distance
between [REDACTED].
A measure of *tenderness*.

I've been writing [REDACTED].
I've been told to get closer to it. So I am.
But I'm no less tripped up on it. There are two stories

[REDACTED].
In one, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. In another, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Only you remember the latter.
I keep trying to return the favor. Does that make sense?
I remember it [REDACTED],

your arm draped across the back of a wooden chair,
the cigarette in your fingers, [REDACTED]
around the smoke of what you'd [REDACTED].

*I will always remember when the stars fell
down around me and lifted me up...*

—Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*

there are so many ways to keep [REDACTED] quiet (and as many ways to [REDACTED])

Austin, 2018

I visit our childhood field, on impulse,
my tongue passing over the raw spot

where I've peeled dry skin from my lip.
Behind me, [REDACTED]

the grass mowed low at my feet.
The city is changing, rent's gone up,

[REDACTED]
just short of unrecognizable. It feels [REDACTED]

the earth having lost its [REDACTED]
on the backs of my legs. I will not rest here,

like I used to, I will tell [REDACTED]
that we lost [REDACTED]

our small patch of southern wilds.
I dig down to a cool layer of earth,

seeking [REDACTED].
We buried dozens. No one could stop us

[REDACTED] weighing them
[REDACTED] stashing the ones with the right heft

in our pockets until we got back to the field.
Each was given its own plot: a shallow hole,

carefully patted dirt. Builders will develop
this lot next year. Today, it's more hushed

than it's ever been. I want to [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. The bulldozer won't know to listen.

i'm unfolding my childhood again, convinced it's a map i haven't read right,
convinced there's [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] For so long,

I've been unraveling [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Uncomfortable
language crowds my tongue
[REDACTED]

and I am tired of my thoughts,
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I want to think

we can let it go [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

lessons i like to think [REDACTED] with the gift of a pet rock, the lion
king band-aid on top [REDACTED]

quietness isn't necessarily empty, be [REDACTED],
there's a whole internal world you cannot see
from the surface, it's worth it to attune your ear
to hurts that go unspoken, it isn't always foolish
to [REDACTED] a thing that cannot love you back, [REDACTED]
whenever you can, [REDACTED] is a healing practice—
what power you have with [REDACTED] in your hands,
be tender-hearted, my [REDACTED], you are right to think
that everything around you holds a little pain
[REDACTED]

the moon is curved and [REDACTED], and i am skilled in its shape

*

Toilets on space shuttles
convert urine to drinking water
so there is nowhere for women
to bleed.

*

Constellations are culturally defined.

Cassiopeia: a dolphin's tail,
a woman's breasts, five unrelated stars.

Let's call it a bite mark, a burn scar.
A cesarean incision made unsteady in the dark.

Let's call the black sky what's survived.

*

The first astronauts were former airmen.
Their fighter jets severed the wind,
left contrails of keloid smog.

*

Military women often skip their periods
when deployed. The nuisance of bloodshed
managed with small white tablets.

Not unlike chalk.
Not unlike old-school punishment:
copy 100 times *I will not.*

1461 pills will cover a four-year contract.
There are more likely causes of death
than a hormone-induced blood clot.

*

Spent gunpowder is an earthly scent
akin to moon dust, so say men

who have visited the moon, men for whom
gunfire is an obvious referent.

*

A difference between astronomy
and gynecology is that shame
has never governed our study of stars.

*

Let's say ours is a mammalian moon
caught in constant oogenesis,

a gleaming ovum coaxing oceans'
longing strokes against the shore.

*

Amniotic fluid alters the fetal feeling
of gravity. Liquid buoyancy nears zero-gs
early in pregnancy

*

If we had done an exam of pre-cosmic night,
speculum inserted, through the stretched sky
we might have glimpsed a heat-hazed image:
a canal coated in molten black mucus.

We might have witnessed a birth. The Big Bang.
Felt our vision photodegrade, blaze and temper
as the burst scattered and darkness recovered
our sight.

If we had done this, would we praise any less
the light?

*

The first gynecology patients were enslaved.
Their flesh wept meteorite metal,
stained sutures with iron blood.

*

Science suggests that menstruation
is a type of reproductive right.

For example, the human uterus sheds
unfit embryos before they fully implant,
preventing maternal injury
and eventual infant death.

*

The moon's familiar bloom might have soothed
enslaved Yorubans. It was their lunar goddess, long
ago, whose water broke to flood our barren planet,
bearing life of desolation.

*

A space journey is called a mission.
an astronaut's travel a tour of duty.
So it is: we cannot *explore*
without meaning *conquer*.

*

A difference between the night sky
and black bodies is that slit air won't scream
in the absence of anesthesia.

*

NASA discovered 7 earth-sized exoplanets
and called it *a treasure trove*.

What can be extracted remains unknown,
but we seem particularly interested in water.

*

A difference between earth
and exoplanets is that imperialism
in outer space is still imagined.

*

Rat studies suggest that zero-gs
could stunt human growth
before and after birth.

For example, the woman would struggle
to pass the placenta. The child, untethered,
would struggle nursing.

*

16 seconds before flight, water floods
the launchpad, dampens the sonic impact
of blast-off. Rockets launch undamaged
due to flowing liquid.

*

Let's say stars and planets
are contaminant relics

streaking, swirling, spotting the sky.

Not unlike dilute blood.

Not unlike a woman's endometrium
sinking in water.

boko haram abducted more schoolgirls. [REDACTED]

sandals are strewn in the sand / in the glassed image in my hand / and
the wrong questions scratch at my throat / i want to know / what size
the soles / how flat the feet they were torn from / how rough the thong-rubbed
skin between the toes / i want to know [REDACTED]

i fix my mouth [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] i want to say / no / how many degrees
of girlhurt away / [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] i placate / my phone's sleep screen veils
the sandals / black and skinwarmed / against my cheek

*

there are many things i will never tell
[REDACTED] / some of these i tell no one /
like how [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] / i claw at the
mist of it / the light untorn / so when
the stolen girls / (returned) / say they
were fed and well-treated / downplay
the deaths of five peers / i don't trust
their reports / i know how [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a schoolgirl assures

they didn't harm us / and i hear [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the shutter / the untold:

in which love is a practice of [REDACTED] under the gaze of a racist state

*it is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking
at oneself through the eyes of others. –W.E.B. Du Bois*

the man i love prepares for death
as it seeps from the television,
hangs in the air like water wanting mold.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

to catch the bullet slicing air.

from up close, the iris and its pupil
are like any other reflective surface, meaning
the officer could be thirteen inches from his face—

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

shuts out the world with me in it.
that night [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] much softer
than asphalt.

in which [REDACTED] the small god of perseverance

Praise the big head that never snapped the neck's stem,
despite looking for years like [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Praise the small body
that rushed none into grownness [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Praise the bronzed grit on the calves,
the [REDACTED] red
undersoil. Praise the greyed knees. Praise
the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED], seeking relief
from sunwhite glare. Praise the boy in repose,
black and unbothered in broad daylight.

Praise the fine creases of the throat, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED].
Praise the wound, the removed tissue. The cancer
that lived short and died hungry. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
the palm nestled between earth and earlobe.

The hospital wristband faded and dirtied
by the business of being [REDACTED].

██████████ is gentle before he knows it

██████████ doesn't nick himself the first time
he shaves, checks and re-checks his cheeks

for specks of blood. I watch him find his face
unmarred ██████████, knowing already

he's looked beyond himself and slipped
through ██████████. Above his bed

██
██

in a body he's unsure ██████████
██ A pebble

hit the windshield once and broke his thoughts,
left a web of tiny fissures in the glass, proof of impact

arched like ██████████
██.

the world according to [REDACTED]

there's a recurring thought [REDACTED]

that we should change [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

the name suggesting [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

we designed a symbol once,

with a matching sound,

and kept it secret. we made

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

improvisations on versions of what we've been, [REDACTED]

The black princess isn't dead.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED], but goes unpunished,
for I arrive with a goat on my back,
its front hooves crossed [REDACTED]
and it is martyred instead. Or, I am,
drowned in a river [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]—

in this version,
everyone lives. I kiss her hands,
she palms the nape of my neck.
We keep [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
to [REDACTED].
Or, there are no men, only women
[REDACTED].

We women float on the river,
breathing, softly, at [REDACTED].
We climb trees and [REDACTED],
we dig dens and [REDACTED], we [REDACTED]
on an open plain, safely.
If we are ravenous [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], our bodies growing
to be mighty and soft.
No—

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] No god descends
on [REDACTED]
and build continents. All water
and earth is in constant union.

We all have scales and gills.

Or, we are [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and we open
our whole bodies to hear,
to see, [REDACTED]
We are never strangers.
We accrue no [REDACTED],
and seek no [REDACTED].
We are untethered,

like goats
on a hillside with no fence
and no shepherd. We are [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

in which [REDACTED] humbles the sky

He used to confuse the words [REDACTED] and [REDACTED],
thought it all [REDACTED], thought it magic
that our [REDACTED]

or solidify in the winter, like the icicles
that formed on the gutters overnight.

[REDACTED] honed his eye for the mystic
while I read my books, both of us
building a sense [REDACTED].

In college, I pointed out Aquarius: *water bearer*,
that's your sign, took his hand in mine

to trace the constellation in the sky.
When I described a man pouring water from a jar,

he flipped my hand to draw the stars on my palm.

He told me what he saw: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

[REDACTED]
he said, [REDACTED]

in which i refract the inherited world to [REDACTED]

the origin ritual is this:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

in a large round pot.
My ant-pecked palm
is the first [REDACTED],

the water I trickle to make clay:
the first [REDACTED].
I shape [REDACTED],

flat-lining feet to legs,
torso to neck, one column.
I add an arm, pressing clay

to side-body, carving grooves
for her fingers at hip.
Child of [REDACTED],

this one will be [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Until then,
I'll hold her lone hand,

sculpt a small [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

or:

Wading shin deep in dark water,
[REDACTED]

like a leopard's lapping tongue.

As the heaving water calms,

my floating [REDACTED]

slightly foreign, buoyant
and slick. My fingertips find [REDACTED]

[REDACTED],

tracing them like [REDACTED]

toward the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

is [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED],

[REDACTED] and [REDACTED] at the touch

of [REDACTED],
the only light a small gleam

on [REDACTED],

the sound of [REDACTED]

slipping from [REDACTED].

sometimes i try to [REDACTED] before i could spell violence
Texas, 2016

the dead of summer finds me
tight-roping the concrete blocks
between a disused parking lot
and a vacant field.
 the hip-high grass is still,
 the tip of each blade
 blurred by the sun's deep light.

~

the sun's quiet seeps into pavement
and echoes [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
through the clear flames.

~

someone approaches, distorted,
the barrier of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
lapping clear as rain.

~

someone, somewhere
between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED],
seeps into my field of vision.
this, how [REDACTED] find me,
unsteady on concrete,
wishing myself [REDACTED]

~

somewhere, i am [REDACTED],
or someone i was
is [REDACTED] (how easily
i stray from the point).

~

a small point— [redacted]
[redacted]
small too: the point where light
hits my pupil, rendering [redacted],
[redacted] their heat visible.

~

what violence Man has done
[redacted]
[redacted] (what are the poetics
of genocide?)

~

i should walk this rope
right out of the world.
look: my toes already
the only part of me, here.

~

the point:
i choose [redacted]
with all my heart.
but look: i walk a world
built to destroy it, destruction
at the root, in the limbs,
in my wallet.

~

[redacted] in the air: shimmering
flames, or water streaming
the sides of a glass box.
(what color is [redacted]
[redacted])

~

a wall of [redacted]
[redacted] echoes
[redacted]