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BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SIGHT

by

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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

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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.

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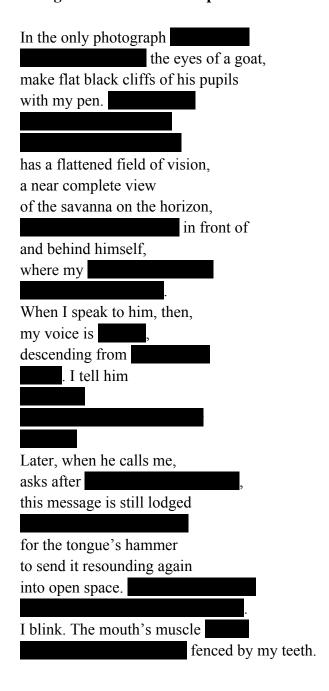
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People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

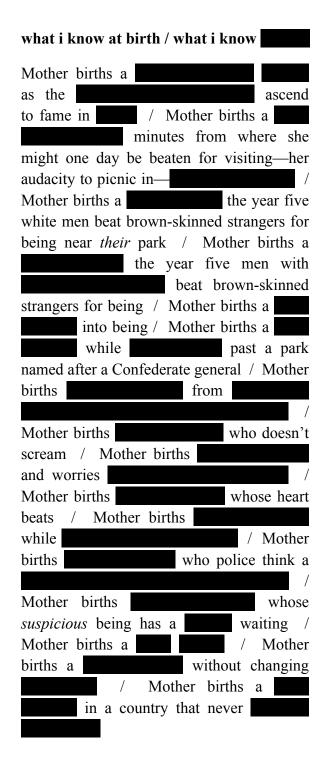
—James Baldwin, Stranger in the Village

facing the failure of a cast spell

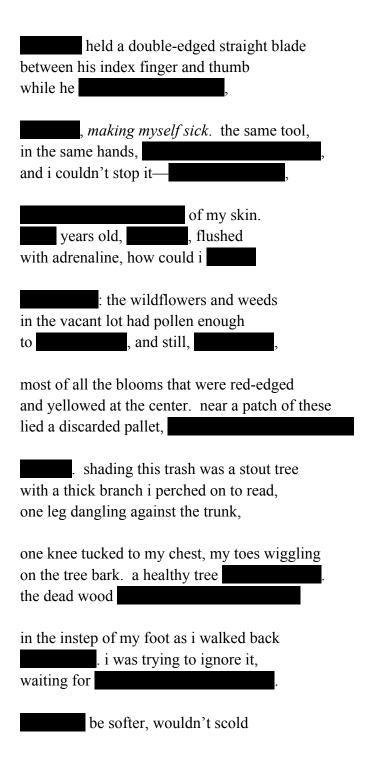


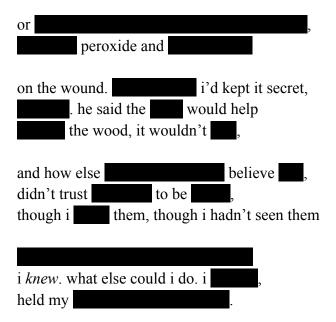
Texas, 1998	
News says they drug him behind a truck until and to them that made him seethes, kicking at dirt	
and weighing a helpless curse on his tongue. Their way of seeing a threat that lingers fresh and as	
years old and molted , wobble, wrap my palms around the that straddle my shoulders, find	
twist the chains above me until the swing's pull. Head thrown back, legs flailing, I am a blur of and and and and,	
the world turned to wind, flashes of light, something like	

james byrd jr. is murdered a few hours away and



force, field.

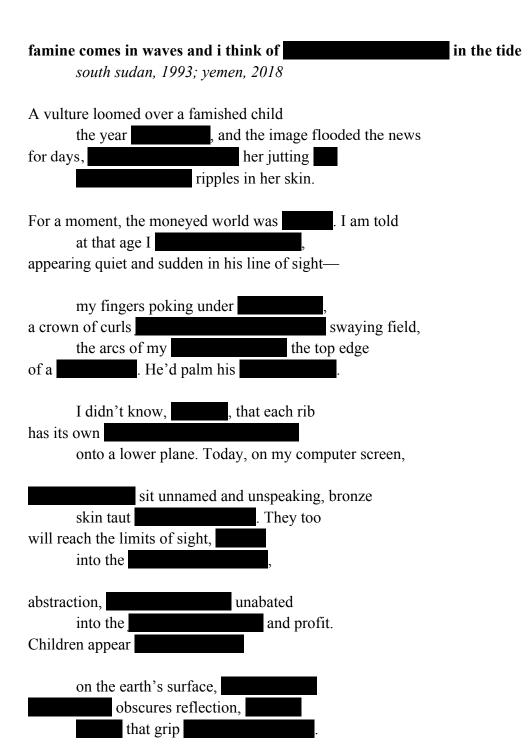


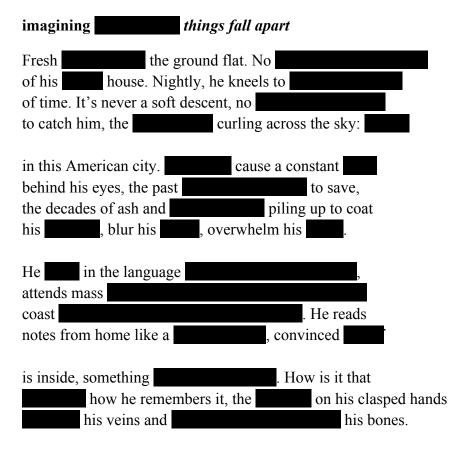


in the house of

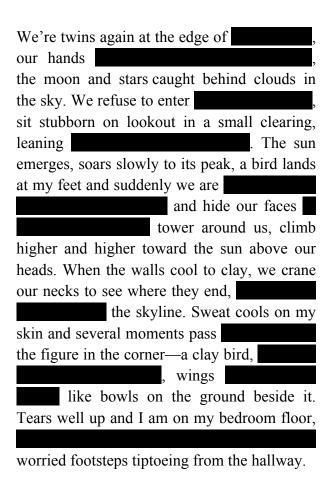
We're twins at the edge of
brush grown thick and
Branches scratch and pick at our calves
as we enter. Above us,
. Ahead, a light suggests
we might not be alone.
of the forest until we are weak with hunger
need-driven toward the
a mud house with its inner walls kiln-bright
no electricity, no fire,
of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

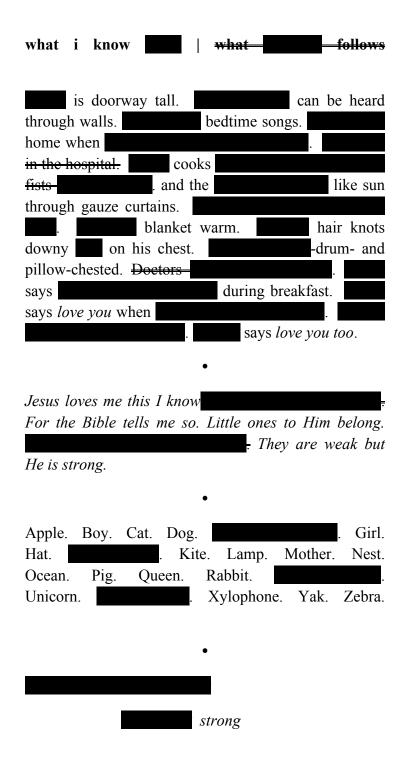
wars against "The answer, of course, has been a calculated weapon in the civil war ."—TIME Magazine, January between and stores bananas, granola bars, loose cash, and napkins in sucks air between his teeth and moans whenever he sees on the street. I am when he invites a man to sit with him and his youngest children when he brings at a to tears for shunning him, walking six times past his table without . I learn while young merits, to finish more condone. and when I meet I am and of his youth: bellies, bodies withering for lack of protein, for want of a They stare at me from the archives of *TIME*, an away. daily winning and doomed.





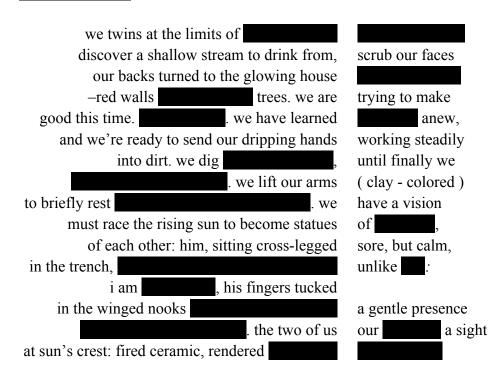
in the house of



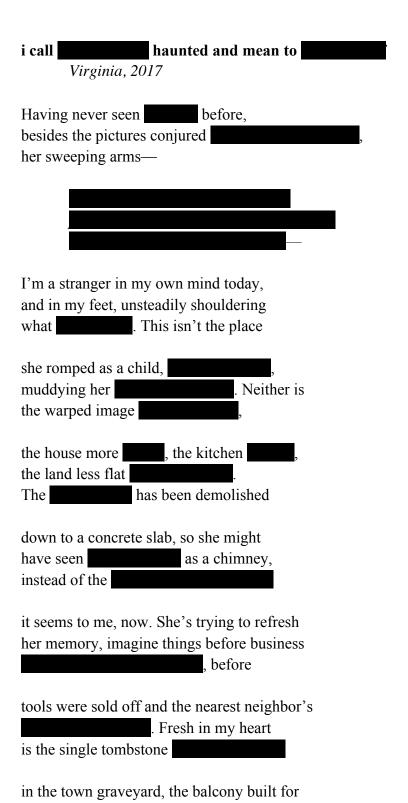


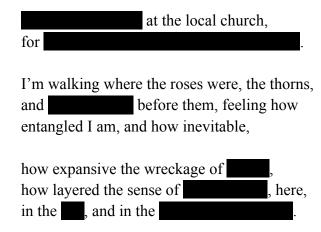
in the house of

give honeysuckle and make us sweet , amen



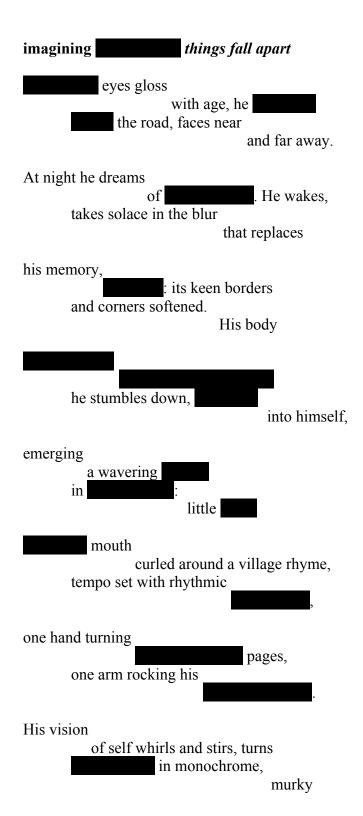
upon imagining the origin of my name On the first day of week, I draw a bath and emerges chin first, seizing, a sudden slosh in rising tide, flinging soap on my face. I press one palm with the other, whisper our name carob fingers on porcelain tub, above sudsy water. a tar hollow, no teeth or tongue, but we share having ever met. and I I turn off the faucet that binds us, so I mirror her silence, try to make sense of her dancing jaw. Earnest, she points a palmful of water. I refuse to drink. She points forearm trembling. grasp her hand, reach . I want to say I need to tend to. , but it feels and might make me a liar, so there's only rushing at her wrinkled feet. I as she wilts, the , limbs curling . I untangle , pull my hand from the nook of her chest and chin, sit silent for hours , wake to

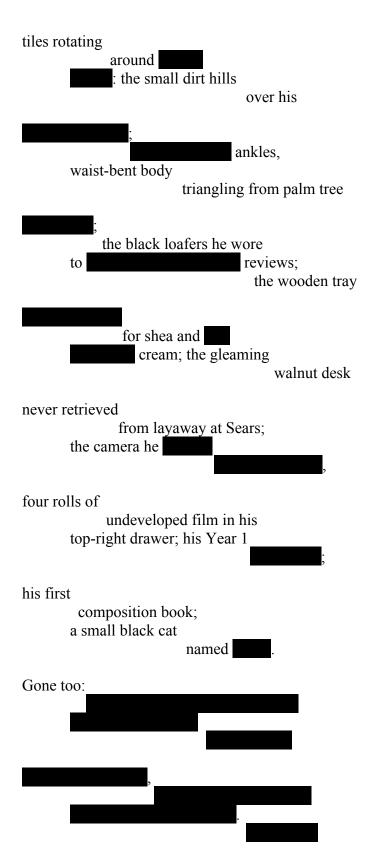




forcefield

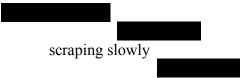
is a place i wouldn't know i'd touched but for a picture in which scared of something has her palm and forehead pressed to the





is all he sees,

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



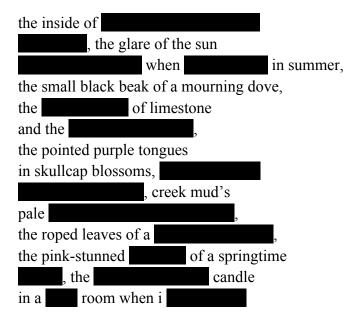
He keeps

his private.

The he would utter darkness to

is likewise

a catalogue of colors to describe



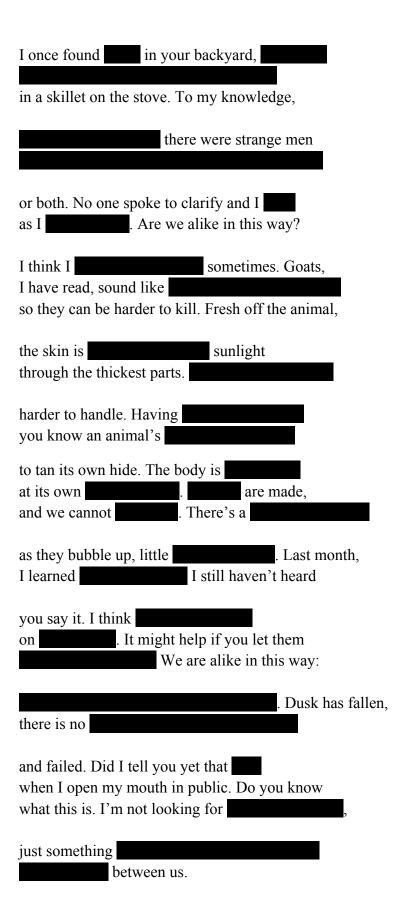
[unsent letters

[little pockets of quiet]

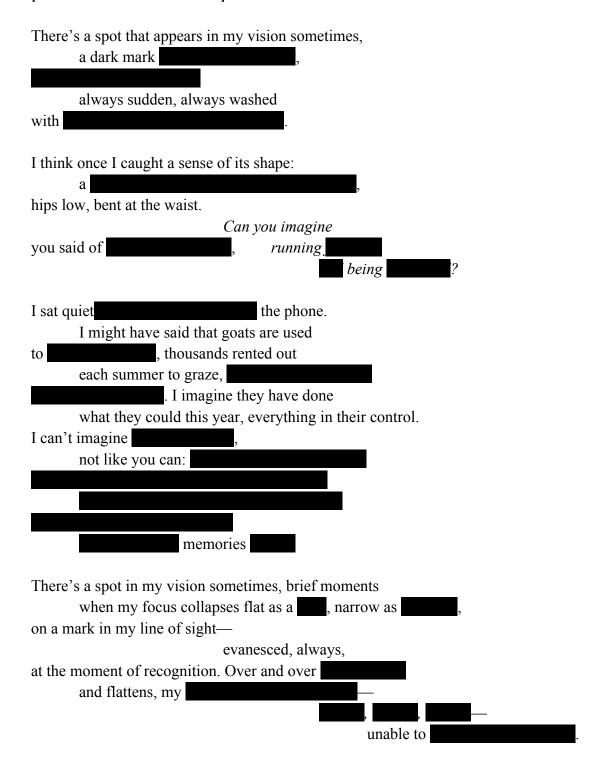
~ 1 ~

and found a on the doorstep
of my office building. I thought this an and entered, still. Did it surprise you, too, how early dusk fell? I remember where
5-5-7 all clear. Being the one who left, this time, I have a sense of If it bothers you
you do not say. We are alike in this way, . If the
I couldn't see them. I saw no blood, no signs of choking peering from the shrubs.
Actually, in your city, dusk is just falling, bars of shadow
stretching across the
I learned this at eleven,
. There was so little I could

There is so little, still. The small circle you will walk tonight is
It may feel bigger. You've in your legs, lost length in your gait, your knees
than I choose to: I could 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
From what I've gathered, yours is a culture in which is boasted, a toxin kept to oneself. I can appreciate
as a protective impulse I haven't developed. I might be happier if I had. Lately, I haven't been able to without , or wanting to. There's a
I've grown less able to quiet. There's a we have, a heat behind my Listen. You've said
your people were I read this article and wondered
thinking it now, for the first time, the latter.



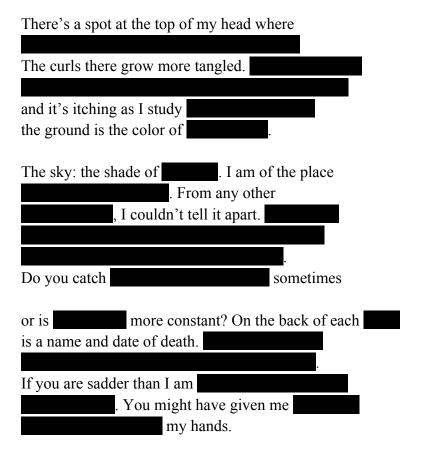
[visions on a horizontal axis]



[the color of my knuckles]

~ 1 ~

I still have the photos you gave	ve me
The mystery	a constant, not knowing
I am thinking now of the mys	stery of the gift itself:
these are your only copies. I'unsentimental or generous. It the sun shining only in pocke	rained all afternoon today,
and turned away before	. The brain
fills gaps in vision to make se	ense—some of my gaps
are constant. I caught a glimp	se of someone in a window,
and couldn't place her	

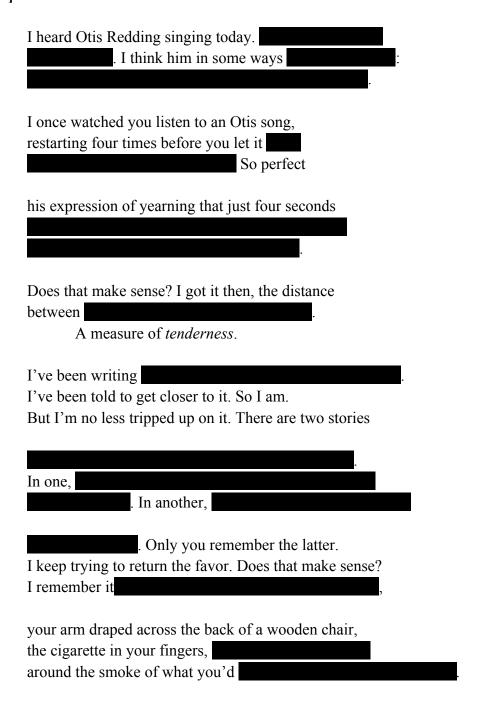


[sphering the mirror] My knowledge of so flat and quiet, so stuck in paper's pulp, photographs and books, what ink I've scanned in search of I saw her in a news report, displacing the poor for oil money in the robbed I fear there is more violence anger so hungry to burn it never yields. Tell me what it was like to find Did you recognize him? did that make a difference? The world is a mess and I constantly flattening to be , to be justified

by the . I have wanted

so ______, it never heals. I think you might get this: I have ______ and would like to be less. Let me start with a spherical view of myself. Let me start by admitting I could

[otis]

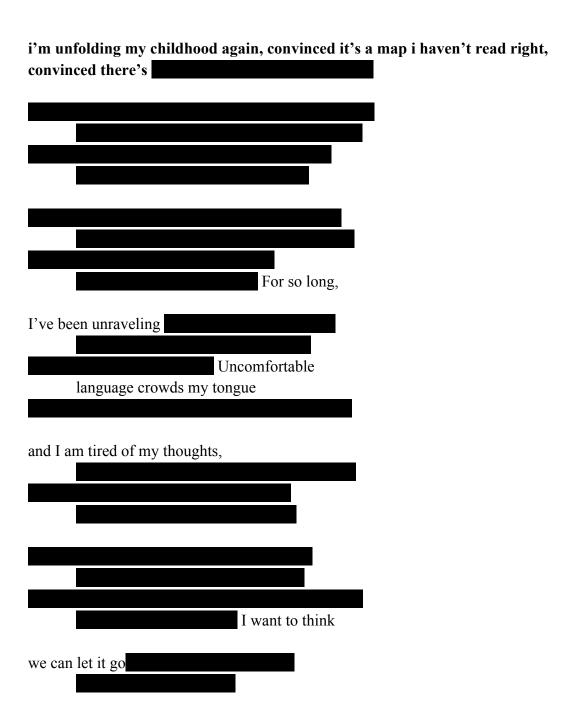


I will always remember when the stars fell down around me and lifted me up...

—Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*

quiet (and as many ways to there are so many ways to keep 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, the grass mowed low at my feet. The city is changing, rent's gone up, just short of unrecognizable. It feels the earth having lost its on the backs of my legs. I will not rest here, like I used to, I will tell that we lost our small patch of southern wilds. I dig down to a cool layer of earth, seeking We buried dozens. No one could stop us weighing them 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 

lessons i like to think	with the gift of a pet rock, the lion
king band-aid on top	
quietness isn't necessarily empty, be	
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	
a thing that cannot love you back,	
whenever you can, is a healing practice—	
what power you have with in your hands,	
be tender-hearted, my , you are right to think	
that everything around you holds a little pain	

, 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.

hoko	haram	abducted	moro	school	airle	
DOKO	naram	avuucteu	more	SCHOOL	giris.	

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

i fix my mouth

i want to say / no / how many degrees
of girlhurt away /

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

*

there are many things i will never tell

/ some of these i tell no one /

like how

/ 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

a schoolgirl assures

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

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

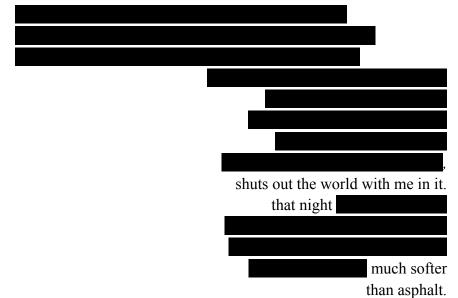
it is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others. -W.E.B. Du Bois

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



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—

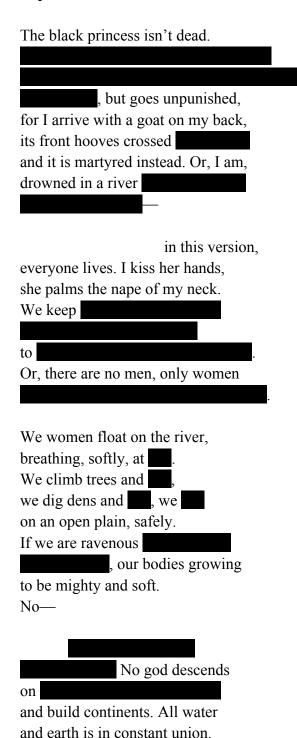


in which	the small god of perseverance
Praise the big head that never despite looking for years like	
	Praise the small body
that rushed none into grownno	ess
Praise the bron	ized grit on the calves,
the	red
undersoil. Praise the greyed k	nees. Praise
the	
, seeking	relief
from sunwhite glare. Praise th	ne boy in repose,
black and unbothered in broad	l daylight.
Praise the fine creases of the t	hroat,
Praise the wound, the remove	
that lived short and died hung	ry.
the palm nestled between eart	
The hospital wristband faded	and dirtied
by the business of being	

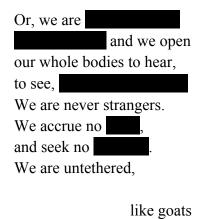
is gentle before he knows it
doesn't nick himself the first time he shaves, checks and re-checks his cheeks
for specks of blood. I watch him find his face unmarred knowing already
he's looked beyond himself and slipped through . Above his bed
restless, adrift
in a body he's unsure
A pebble
hit the windshield once and broke his thoughts, left a web of tiny fissures in the glass, proof of impact
arched like

the world according to there's a recurring thought that we should change the name suggesting we designed a symbol once, with a matching sound, and kept it secret. we made

improvisations on versions of what we've been,



We all have scales and gills.

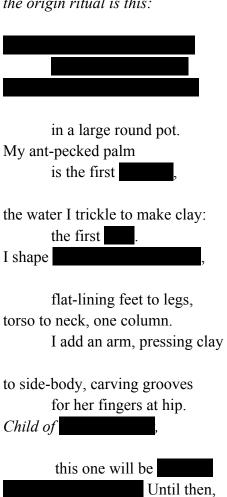


on a hillside with no fence and no shepherd. We are

in which humbles the sky
He used to confuse the words and thought it all thought it magic that our
or solidify in the winter, like the icicles that formed on the gutters overnight.
honed his eye for the mystic while I read my books, both of us building a sense
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:
he said,

in which i refract the inherited world to

the origin ritual is this:



sculpt a small

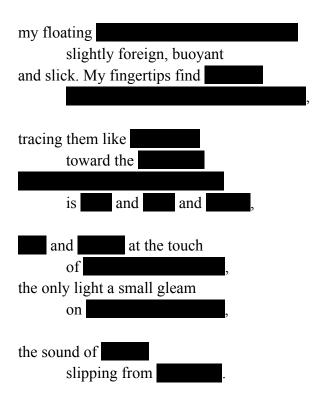
or:

Wading shin deep in dark water,

I'll hold her lone hand,

like a leopard's lapping tongue.

As the heaving water calms,



sometimes i try to

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

through the clear flames.

~

someone approaches, distorted, the barrier of

lapping clear as rain.

~

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

~

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

a small point—

small too: the point where light hits my pupil, rendering their heat visible.

 \sim

what violence Man has done

(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 with all my heart.

but look: i walk a world built to destroy it, destruction at the root, in the limbs, in my wallet.

~

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

~

a wall of echoes