

SCUTTERFIELD
A Collection of Poems

by

Tila Neguse

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts degree

MFA Program for Writers
Warren Wilson College

May 29, 2024

Director

Date

Contents

“Scutterfield Public Housing”	1
“Cartography”	2
"Red Africa"	3
"St. Louis, MO—This. City. Will. Eat. You. Alive."	4
"Jamaica Red Bush"	5
"Castle by the Sea"	6
"Neguse Means King"	8
"Our Bodies"	9
"Quadrupedal"	10
"Selfie"	11
"When Men Tell Me To Smile"	12
"Tradition States:"	15
"Nighttime Admission"	18
“Kabey Metsiki? / Where Are You From?”	20
“Tsehay Beriqa / The Sun is Shining”	21
"When Doves Cry”	22
“Scutterfield, Ice Storm”	24
"I Wanna Be Rich"	25
"The Streets of St. Louis"	26
"Everything Bad Happens in St. Louis-A Timeline in Black and White"	27
"Ars Poetica: A Poem in Repose"	28
“Brontë’s Bird”	29
"Wandalust"	30
"Getting a Degree in English Lit."	31
"When Men Write About Women"	32
“Heroes Don't Exist”	34

"Dear Diary"	35
"White Girls"	36
"Brontë's Bird II"	37
"The Three Stories"	38

SCUTTERFIELD PUBLIC HOUSING

At 1077 North Manassas, in Scutterfield,
the street was lined with green porches
and yards of yellow tufts with grass-like tips.

Grass doesn't grow in the projects.
But there was always dirt for mud castles and chocolate cake.
We built castles out of the mud in these yards.

We built castles and birthday cakes with sticks for candles.
The dirt and water living under our fingernails,
I bit my fingernails and ate dirt laced with water.

We danced in the bloodless magnolias
and feasted on the rotten grass,
torn from the damp earth.

We fell feral to the ground,
grasping our stomachs upturning
like larvae in their prenatal shells churning

butter into flies,
caked dirt and water on my hands, brought to my mouth,
tasted like dirt laced with water.

Let the worms weave dirt trails
in and out
through my tiny fingers.

And let me, callow,
cower in the barren yards
at 1077 North Manassas Street,

where, when I was young,
I used to yield the unfertile, ungreen earth
to bear brown castles.

CARTOGRAPHY

You made me
believe in the demarcation of borders

as you traced with the tips of your lace fingers
the lines imbedded
on my inner thighs since puberty.

You followed their pattern
as if tracing the lines on a taut leather

map from the fifteenth century
of the Dark Continent
where the Blue Nile flows
from Sudan in Khartoum to Ethiopia at Lake Tana—

playing over the rocks at the falls of Tis Issat
where Pêro da Covilhã first wept

at the sight of water breaking against jagged rocks.
I yielded to your exploration:

You grazed the lines of broken skin
on my body, tiny rivulets
printed on brown parchment and
marveled at my topography.

You discovered

I have been stretched

in this elastic skin. I am marked.

RED AFRICA

I want to take this red clay earth
And grind it between my teeth
Until
My mouth
Bleeds
Red Africa.

ST. LOUIS, MO— THIS. CITY. WILL. EAT. YOU. ALIVE.

red brick city on the banks of
the Mississippi, sleepy-eyed monster
that wakes only to feed, there's blood
on its lips, from chewing shattered
glass, cable wires, shoe strings, it's
been busy again at the slaughter
of dreams, it feasts well at the
massacre of things and what i mean
is this city will eat you alive, this is
where dreams go to die, this is why
you have to stay woke & fight the urge
to chase night with rum & coke
crown & smoke, gin & choke, beer & broke
don't let it catch you slipping, don't let it
catch you sleeping, it eats well at massacre
of dreams, this city will eat you alive
like Grendel, at the Hall of Heorot
and you over there, plump and
drunk at the mead hall
& woke up in the belly of the beast.

JAMAICA RED BUSH

I caught your scent in my cup of tea today.
It was Jamaica Red Bush, herbal,
imported from the dreadlocked Rastafari
on the beaches at Negril
and bartered for across the Caribbean
seas, carried in drifting wooden crates,
rocked back and forth on the rolling tide.
It was easy and warm as it went down,
with crimson tea leaves bleeding in clear waters.
The caffeine from this sanguine tea mingled
with my blood, a blushing bloom of transfusion.
And it tasted like flowers, Red Hibiscus,
hand-picked by sun-kissed, bare-backed farmers
dreaming of Zion on the mountains of Ethiopia.
The Red Sea reflected in my red tea.
I drank a ruddy flower today.
And now you are here before me in full bloom,
at the bottom of my porcelain cup.

CASTLE BY THE SEA

1482. The Portuguese landed in Elmina
and built a Castle by the Sea.

Amankwa to the natives.

But the Portuguese tongue
could not form the sound,
accustomed to rolling over
R and gliding over *S*.

So they called it, São Jorge da Mina,
this Castle by the Sea
with white mortar walls
and limestone paneling
built upon fresh soil
still burning from the fires
that cleared the land.

In the Castle by the Sea
there lived not a prince and
his princess, but a governor
and his wife. White.
like the Castle by the Sea.
They came for gold
but soon remembered
the candied taste of sugar
on the tongue, the way
the mouth thirsted for these
lucid crystals extracted from cane,
swaying on the plantations in Brazil.

*The wind is in the cane.
Blown from the shores of Elmina and
caroling rusty vespers across the Atlantic
to America.*

The governor and his crew
sent men into the Bush
to barter for them.
The mosquitoes kept them
inside the Castle walls,
burnt holes into their skin,
tiny fires printed in copper,
leaking into the blood,
hot and feverish, let them
pour forth their alabaster
insides onto this black soil.

They cursed the African flies
that draped sleep over their eyes.
They should have died
in the Castle by the Sea.

In the Bush, the men fought
for gold and slaves.
The Ashanti captured the Fanti
and brought them linked in chains,
a forged iron brotherhood
to the Castle by the Sea.
The governor smiled and
gave the Ashanti guns and sent them
back into the Bush for more.
The Ashanti kings marveled over the
virgin feel of cold metal against hot skin.

*The beaches of the West African Coast
are lined with haunted castles.
And the pillaging ghosts of Samori and Babatu
stalk along the phantom walls
searching for human chattel.*

The governor placed the captured men
in vaults meant to hold gold
underneath the Castle by the Sea,
stripped them naked and
beat them bloody till the
white mortar walls ran red
with black blood.

*I wonder what they must have felt
when they saw those monsters on the horizon,
Those strange ships bobbing up and down,
Bearing men carrying the might of God in barrels.*

NEGUSE MEANS KING

In the beginning:

The regents wore our name as a title.

Negus Bahri. Of the sea

Negus Chaka. Of the forest.

I, too, wear the title of Neguse.

I, the daughter of Elias,

son of Yemane,

and we are the ancestors of Neguse,

commoners as we are,

country people, *hagereseb*

from Adi Felesti

goat herders & forest dwellers

stinking & sun-burnt

bloodied & broken,

we are fighters from the fields

with dust covered feet & soiled cloaks

wearing the title of King.

OUR BODIES

Our bodies become constellations
in the sea at night
because bioluminescent
phytoplankton nibble at
our nude figures &
make iridescent outlines of our bodies
become one sometimes because
we let some bodies enter
our bodies become a home for others
even though sometimes we don't
feel at home in our bodies
are strangers to ourselves.

This body
no one asked for, our bodies
we're forced to
live in, to love in, to skin in.

Our bodies are these vessels
designed without
our input. What if we don't like
this body was made to sustain the
salt burn of the sea, but this body
still feels the sting when
bodies more beautiful present
themselves in contrast
against this body
is not made for me.

QUADRUPEDAL

I spent a long time on my knees.
 I spent a long time on my knees praying for you.
 I spent a long time on my knees bowing before you.
 I spent a long time with my hands on my knees, dancing for you.
 I spent a long time on my knees crawling after you.
 I spent a long time on my knees pleading with you.
 I spent a long time on my knees scrubbing the floors for you.
 I spent such a long time on my knees,
 I started worshipping you.
 I spent a long time on all fours and ended up
 a hound frothing at the mouth for you
 a bitch scratching at the back door for you
 howling for you to let me in, on my knees
 a table top for you to rest your feet
 and flesh for me to sink my teeth, on my knees
 I spent such a long time on my knees
 I learned how to arch my back and use
 my knuckles to walk.
 And when my knees and knuckles could
 no longer hold the weight of this bridge
 called my back
 when my tailbone began to poke through
 and you used it as a hook to lay your hat
 I laid flat
 until I felt like I was becoming
 human again, unbent unbroken,
 I spent a long time on my knees
 they were stiff and calloused
 and raw and red and full of dirt
 there were pebbles ground in the wound
 from all the time I spent on my knees
 but my spine still could uncurl, unfurl
 into a shape straight and tall into
 something you might resemble
 something you might recognize
 Some thing on two feet
 not on its knees.

SELFIE

When I feel beautiful, I take pictures to remind myself of how ugly I am. I aim for the worst angles possible. The worst lighting. The kind that will capture every imperfection perfectly. I want to see the bulges & dips & craters & bumps & moles & meat chains & microscopic hairs & two breasts like bronze pendulums holding the weight of ugly in their sway. I want to see how deep ugly goes, at the molecular level.

When I feel ugly, which is often, I take pictures to remind myself of how beautiful I am. I aim the camera high and marvel at the myth created through the lens. It is mathematics. 45-degree acute angle, three inches above the height of the eyes. How the ugly become beautiful is harder to capture than the inverse. There's a certain magic to this process built on angles and filters. You see, from the right viewpoint, the dorsal hump in my nose becomes a mark of Abyssinian beauty and the sun behind the camera makes the brown in my eyes gleam.

When I am done, I scroll through the camera roll. A curated art gallery of self-portraits only the artist would notice the differences between. I stare at each one like I am seeing me, who I know so well, for the first time. Oscillating aesthetics perfectly captured. This is me and this is me and this is me and this is me too. I delete them all one by one.

WHEN MEN TELL ME TO SMILE

Instead, I want to grit my teeth,
grate my tongue and push the pink
flesh through the spaces between
each tooth, till my tongue is nicked
and gnawed—*HELL NAW* is what
I want to say

When Men Tell Me To Smile

Instead, I want to look as crazy as
they probably think I am
for not smiling.

When Men Tell Me To Smile

I die a little on the inside.
Which I think is good. It's good to die
a little when a man tells
you to do anything, especially a man
you don't know—*HELL NO* is what
I want to say

When Men Tell Me To Smile

Instead, I want to roll my eyes back
as far as they can go, till there's
no pupil or iris, only the white
flashing through flickering
exorcist eyelids and a face
fixed into a grimace.

When Men Tell Me To Smile

It makes me want to gag.
But I don't. It's not good to gag
in front of men, especially a man
you don't know. They might think
it's erotic. It might turn them
on. It might give
them hope—*NOPE!* is what

I want to say

When Men Tell Me To Smile

Instead, I cut my teeth
on tight lips

When Men Tell Me To Smile

I kind of want to laugh
(at them, not with them.)
But I don't. It's not good to laugh
in front of men, especially a man
you don't know, they might think
you're friendly, they might think
you're nice. they might think
you are laughing at them. They might
think they're in luck —FUUUCK! is what
I want to say

When Men Tell Me To Smile

I wish I had fangs.
That way, they'd be scared.
It's good to scare men, especially a man
you don't know. I'd like to bare
my fangs from my resting bitch face.
My bitch never sleeps.
My bitch is awake and hungry
and she eats men

When Men Tell Me To Smile

I fix my face to make the gesture into
a position that reads: pleasant
instead of monster. instead of bitch.

Because I know my life
might depend on it.

*It's just a little smile, baby girl.
Can a get a little smile, sweetie?
You'd be so much prettier if you smile.*

When Men Tell Me To Smile

I know sometimes they really mean it.

TRADITION STATES:

We take our father's first name as our last.

This is next-level patrilineal.
This is genealogy mapped
through a name.

This means with no knowledge
of who you are
of who they were,
you can map your family tree
through the root of your name.

You can discover who you are relative
to your name.

Your father's first name is your last name.
Your father's last name is his father's first name.
And so on and so on
and son of and son of.

In practice:
I am Gual Elias,
daughter of
Elias Yemane,
son of
Yemane Nguse
son of Nguse Habte
and so on and so on
son of and son of.

In our tradition,
there is no family name as you know it.
We aren't the Johnsons or the Freemans or the Smiths.
There's no mailbox with neat letters
in front of freshly mowed yards
of our single family homes
proclaiming who we are.
We are all someone different.

Wives do not belong to their husbands
but they are of their father forever.

Children do not belong to their mother
but they are of their father forever.

Mothers, children, fathers in one family unit
will all have a different last name

but you are always of your father.

In practice:

I am the daughter of Elias.

But, who is he?

There's a mariachi song
called *la hija de nadie*
the daughter of no-one.

In that song, a woman laments
over being

the daughter of no-one,
no-one being a deceitful man
who denies his children his name.

In Eritrea, you can never be the daughter of no-one.

They will call you by
your father's name

regardless if he is no-one.

When they meet you, they will ask you
"Gual min?"

"Who's daughter are you?"

They will address you as the
daughter of _____.

You are always of your father.

Gual Elias. Daughter of Elias.

Being the daughter of Elias,

I ask myself,
who is he?

He is the son of

Yemane but

no-one in his generation
talks about the past.

You have to search

through the names

to find out who you are,
who they are.

To find out what happened
to make them hold their tongues
as if they were from nowhere
as if they were no-one.

Am I the daughter of no-one?

Sometimes, my father lets slip little
 pieces of his identity,
 during small talk, in
 broken English, he mentions
 hunger
 and woman named Lula,
 daughter of _____.
 Before he became a fighter,
 he was a child and
 she was a teacher
 in the school he would
 walk twenty miles to attend.

She had no daughters or sons to call
 her own
 and he had no mother to call his
 and like all of us, they shared no common name
 but they became family
 because
 she fed him when no-one else would
 because
 being of a father was not enough
 to replace the work of being of a mother.

As the daughter of Elias, I listen
 closely for these stories,
 hoping I can figure out
 who am I, daughter of Elias,
 and who is he?

I know
 I'm not the daughter of no-one.

I am Gual Elias,
 daughter of
 Elias Yemane,
 son of
 Yemane Nguse
 and so on and so on
 and son of and son of.

NIGHTTIME ADMISSION

Never afraid of the monster
 under the bed, even as a child
 I was curious. I wasn't afraid,

I was curious. I'm curious still.
 When you live with monsters
 who walk freely in daylight,
 you wonder what the ones

that hide under the bed
 must be like. Even now, on a
 restless night, before I have to
 rise for my 9 to 5, sometimes
 I lie awake waiting for them
 to come out.

I imagine it.
 They call out
 from below the floorboards,
 bellow my name
 in a resounding squall
 that falls feculent
 from some mouth—
 My Name, spoken low and slow
 in syllabic tones
 that trip over some saw-toothed
 tongue,
 making its way to my ears, bleated
 repeated sweet-nothings

how would I like the taste of butter?

They tempt the trade:
 sensible shoes & nylons
 modest necklines & skirts below the knee
 microwaves & ergonomics
 for needle-point stilettos & prickly bare legs
 ball gags & edgeplay
 something otherworldly & delicious

how would I like the feel of leather?

They reach from

beneath the mattress and
 put brackish fingers
around my neck,
 drag them across my skin.
They grasp my shoulders and
 play with the straps of my shift
begging them to fall,
 enticing me to put out the light &
sign my name
 across the place
there would be a heart.
 My Name, spoken low and slow,
shrouded in
 sour saliva & spit.

KABEY METSIKI? / WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

i am from an endless pit
 & sweat rising
 transcontinentally transposed
 to arrive at dust, the earth
 the churches

abyssinia written in the wind
 neighboring government housing
 cracked walls, tears on lacerated

i am from *hey mane*
 west side, east side
 pull these thorns out
 i am from push, persevere

i am
 red meat. red sea.
 movement, immigration
 i am
 in supplication

of here & there
 from ya'll & cotton
 from baba, kab Tessenei
 from magnolias & berbere
 where i will bury all these things

of fat & starch
 from the rays of the southern sun
 across rivers, seas & oceans
 where lucy tread above
 beneath the ground

i am from antebellum mansions
 chipped paint decorating
 linoleum, prayers to porcelain

where you from?
 south side, north side
 of my side brother
 suffer, hustle

from the horn
 al-habash stretching hands out to god
 i am the second generation
 from, i throw my hands up
 from an amalgamation

from community & pound cakes
 from collard greens & coffee
 deki adey, E'rtta mearey
 & from the freshly dug graves
 & take my blues and go'n

TSEHAY BERIQA / THE SUN IS SHINING

I nearly broke my neck that day
I bent my head so far back
with the sole purpose
of watching the clouds move, leviathan
shadows of mute monsters
hiding in childhood closets
I cowered
hoping they would pass me over.

I saw them moving fast that day
rushing as if to go cast shadows on
someone else's light.
As if to gather moisture
As if to rain on
someone else's parade. Good. I thought.
As they slid right on by
As if it isn't dark enough where I live
As if a little sunlight would be sinful
As if I might melt if touched by one
single ray of sun.

WHEN DOVES CRY

picture this:

whole generations born, raised
and fleeing during the thirty year
War for Independence.

families torn apart, then reconstructed,
children born in exile, anchor babies
with feet in both worlds.

imagine, if you will, the picture:

in those days, across the oceans,
after escaping the war,
everyone danced.
men held hands and kissed each other,
a platonic intimacy born in the fields
and reared over the years,
nurtured by toxic nationalism
sprouted in the country side and spread
across the lowlands, the highlands,
the mountains, the Red Sea.

in the field, so my father would tell me,
picture this:

they used to eat dirt
to survive the nights,
shiro without berbere.
before the war was done, they had to run
and beg at the doorsteps of borderlands,
nation states, the ORR, the Catholic Charities
to be let in. to get out.
and they left holding hands.

in those days, after they left,
made it across the oceans,
everything was sweet.

there was no bitter. only the strobe
lights and smoke machines
of the American night clubs
of 1984 playing Prince on repeat.
There was laughing, dancing, hugging,
Johnny Walker, Heineken
and cigarettes. It made it hard
to picture this:

just a year prior
they were in the fields eating dirt,
shiro without berbere
and the beat of the kebero kebero kebero
replaced the sound of the bass
from the speakers and
picture this: they would sing
to pass the night, they would call out,
“Tsehay Beriqa!!” The sun is shining!
Even though it wasn’t but they could picture it.
The women,
would echo back, high-pitched afro-picked,
a sharp tongued, elelelelelelelelelele!

This is what it sounded like.

SCUTTERFIELD, ICE STORM

That year we went head first into the ice.
When the sunlight lent the sky to the rain
and the rain to the ice, we watched the
naked branches of the magnolias bend
under the weight of the elements, snap
and wrestle with the electric wires on the
way down. Like Nordic fisherman, ghetto
vikings, we made sleds out of mattresses
and box springs left by the dumpster. We
slid slick down ice-covered cracked
pavement and when the lights went out,
we sat on the porches with flashlights in
the cold and slush and watched the icicles
drip from the power-lines like diamonds.

I WANNA BE RICH

I want to get my daddy outta that house
I want my mama in a new house
I want new cabinets and floors
I don't want to be poor anymore
I'own wanna be po' no' mo'
I want to be bourgeois
I wanna be boujee
I wanna smell rich and clean
I wanna be thin
being rich and thin go hand in hand
I don't want to live hand to mouth anymore
I'own wanna be po' no' mo'
I want an island
I want a mansion
I want a man who can
buy me a house and get my daddy outta that house
I want a sugar daddy
I wanna eat cake
I want petit fours
I don't want to be poor anymore
I wanna have it made
I want a maid
I don't wanna be the help no more
I don't wanna beg at the doorsteps
of the man no' mo'
I want to step out of the door
onto a porch as wide as the outdoors
I want a fence
to separate me from the
noise of the poor
I want to be quiet
being po' and loud go hand in hand
and I want to sit in my mansion and
sip earl gray
with a greying earl or duke,
Lord! I wanna be rich
I want a big house

THE STREETS OF ST. LOUIS

Remember the open city.
The sounds of the public.
The sirens, the rubber on pavement,
shells on pavement,
the gunshots, the fireworks,
the smell of smoke and fried onions and sewage.
Remember the tumble weaves,
twines of yaki and kankelon
mixed with cigarette butts and decaying brush.
Remember the street lights,
head lights, blue and red lights,
MD 20/20 and cans of Bud Light,
the bass from the speakers
at the stop light.
Remember the East Side,
parking lots full of tricks
and strippers you can touch.
Remember this place and
the design of the displaced,
red bricks crumbling
under this arch into the sky.

ST. LOUIS
MISSOURI

Everything Bad Happens in St. Louis — A Timeline in Black and White

1764

Animal hides.
Furs. Pelts.
Cold colonial **whites**
killing everything — man and
beast — in sight
drunk off manifest destiny &
genocidal in their mission.
St. Louis' unremarkable French
founding fathers,
Pierre Laclede & August
Chouteau discovered
a place that already existed.

1820

The Compromise.
Maine and Missouri.
Missouri is admitted to the Union as
a slave state.

Blood glistens on
the Bootheel.

1857

Dred Scott v. Sandford.
X marks the spot
Are you free? Are you a slave?
Depends on where you lay
your head and rest your feet. St.
Louis Circuit Court says
property has no rights.

In other words,
the opinion of the court reads:

Niggers aren't people.

1916

The City of St. Louis votes
on a ballot initiative:
"No lot in this subdivision shall
be sold to members of the
African race."
No one shall "sell, convey,
lease, or rent to a negro or
negroes."

In other words,

Niggers can't live here.

1917

Across the river, **white** men
descendants of Laclede and
Chouteau, are angry that
Black men were brought in to
work factory jobs. They
Murder. Lynch. Burn. Beat.
Shoot
the **Black** residents of East St. Louis.
They wipe the blood off the
heels of their boots
in the muddy Mississippi.
They light their cigarettes from
the fires that laid waste to
every structure &
left folks hungry, homeless,
scorned & scorched.

Niggers ain't got nowhere to go.

1948

Shelley v. Kraemer
The Shelley family, **Black**
purchases a house in St. Louis.
Louis Kraemer, a **white**
neighbor, sues them, because,
as we learned in 1916,
Niggers can't live here.

The Supreme Court rules in
favor of the Shelleys.

We don't want you here, but
the niggers can stay.

1954

Wendell O. Pruitt Homes and
William Igoe Apartments open.
They are towers to the sky,
low-income, high-rise
33-story housing projects.

Niggers are welcome here.

1955

The hum of **Black** joy roars
through the streets of Mill
Creek
once lined with dappled rows
of storied brick,
houses humming with piano
thumping, ragtime.
Houses, sliced at the legs, in
media res, to make way for a
highway,
in the middle of things
in the middle of **Black** human
beings
silenced by "urban renewal."
Slum-clearance, they called it,
wiped them clear off the map.

In other words:

Niggers can't live here.

1979

The only public hospital for
Black people in the city,
Homer G. Phillips, closes.
The nurses, the doctors,
the sick, the poor, the hungry,
the neighborhood never
recovers from the loss.
The hollowed streets are quiet.

Niggers ain't got nowhere to go.

2001

Ten-year-old Rodney
McAllister
is mauled by a pack of wild
dogs in Ivory Perry Park.
Years of redlining &
displacement
set the conditions for this to
happen.
They arrest Rodney's mother
for neglect
but they forget:
they told us where to live
& we lived there.
Then, they called it a slum,
but we still made our homes in
the trash & ashes
of their ordinances,
their decrees
that left us bait for the wolves.
Even though we knew, in our
core,

*We shouldn't have to live like
this.*

Aug. 9 2014

A body lies on Canfield Drive for
over four hours.
A child, really, gunned down by the
police.

Say his name. Michael Brown.

After over a bicentennial of the
same chorus,
sung over and over:

Niggers aren't people.

Niggers ain't got nowhere to go.

Niggers can't live here.

Niggas are tired of this shit.

Then,
Suddenly, the tune changes—

We Live Here.
Black Lives Matter



Substandard housing: a measure of obsolescence and blight.

ARS POETICA: A POEM IN REPOSE

A poem is at your leisure.

Where words lie—

Odalisque.

The art of lying.

Sinfully-idling

listlessly

on feathered pillows,

propped up around

folds of fat

and meaty chains

of skin.

A poem is for your pleasure.

Where words lie

like lovers.

The art of seduction.

Half-asleep

and full-bodied

on a divan

waiting,

supple-bellied and

slippery-mouthed

to invite you in.

BRONTË'S BIRD

This is not a poem about Emily Brontë.
 This is not a poem about Charlotte Brontë.
 This is not even a poem about the other Brontë sister.
 This is not about the gendered metaphor of caged birds or Heathcliff
 on the moors searching for Cathy's ghost.
 This is not a poem about *Wuthering, Wuthering, Wuthering Heights!*
 This is not even a poem about Kate Bush, though,
 she does share a birthday with Emily Brontë. And, see,
 this is a poem about birthdays.
 This is not a poem about Mr. Rochester
 or *The Madwoman in the Attic*.
 But this is a poem about plain Janes and secrets
 shared between strangers. See,
 this is a poem about a girl—weird and black like me,
 kept in spaces we weren't supposed to be,
 taking up space in dusty corners of rooms
 when we were small, going unnoticed,
 we could read the stories of the Brontë sisters.
 It was romantic, even.
 This is a poem about being Romantic.
 This is Ars Poetica.
 This is ekphrasis.
 See, this is a poem about Tracy Chapman,
 who wrote a song called *Matters of the Heart* in an album
 called *Matters of the Heart* and hid a small gem for me to find
 in that song that never played on the radio,
 in that song she wrote just for me.
 This is a poem for me. She said,
 in a voice so doleful, so melodic

*If today was my birthday,
 I'd be reborn as Brontë's bird.*

And I said, "Wow. Finally, someone gets me."

WANDALUST

After and for wanda coleman

i wanna talk about wanda, wanda can i talk about you
 wanda can i talk to you, wanda, girl, mam, sistuh, mama
 how should i address you, how should i dress for you
 wanda what should i wear, wanda are you worn out
 can i get a word with you wanda what should i call you
 wicked witch wordsmith wonderful wanda i got a mouth
 full of wanda & i wanna talk about wanda

wanda where should we go, wanda you ever been to
 wakanda, wanda how can i reach you on the world wide
 web@wanda, at 1-800-itswanda, why's nobody talkin
 bout you wanda, i'm worried about you
 wanda are you dead

i need to talk to you, i been wandering, girl, i been
 wallowing, wanda i gotta go to work in the morning
 wanda what do you wish for, wanda come to bed
 wanda let's go for a walk, wanda let's drink some
 whiskey, wanda let's do fourteen lines & stay up all
 night cause i need to talk to you wanda

wanda, i been watching you, waaaaaanndaaaaaaa!
 i hear you wanda & i wanna talk about how you done
 opened this wound & i wanna be just like you, wanda
 where are you, wanda i love you

GETTING A DEGREE IN ENGLISH LIT.

When trying to burn her body in the basement furnace, realizing that this body, beautiful, slender and white, would not fit in its entirety, Bigger Thomas sawed off the head of Mary Dalton with a hatchet and threw it in with the rest of the remains.

Raskolnikov, citing Napoleon and poverty as his motivation, after murdering Alyona, split the head of her sister, Lizaveta, in two with a single blow from an axe.

Tereus, although Philomela, after the crime, tore the hair from her scalp, beat her breasts and offered her throat gladly to his sword, left her head, but sliced her tongue from her mouth so she couldn't scream when he hurt her again.

I spent years reading of these literary figures, these men. These men who collect the heads and tongues of women inside the pages of these texts. I wrote about why they were complicated and misunderstood and tragic. About the übermensch, the id, the ego, the superego, the symbolic negro, the quest for voice, the personal, the political, the enigmatic hero. I used the literary and psychological theories of real men to explain the actions of these fictional men whose characters were developed and written in the minds of real men.

When I closed my books, they haunted me in my scholarship and my imagination. I saw them on the streets and in my dreams. And sometimes, when I would leave the library late at night, and alone, I'd hold my pen in a tight grip with my whole hand wrapped around it, the sharp end pointed outward, just in case.

WHEN MEN WRITE ABOUT WOMEN

there's always fragility & flaws.
 She was little more than a girl
 not yet a woman with
 a concave stomach
 breasts like two juicy perky peaches ...
 NO—two dew drops of morning rain!
 NO—two bountiful smiling balls of dough!
 Can bread emote?
 Women sure do.

When Men Write About Women
 breasts have feelings
 they can be startled, they can spin, they move
 effortlessly like the gentle sway of a balmy breeze
 they undulate like the violent waves of the sea.
 Breasts are people too!

When Men Write About Women
 it is an exercise in metaphor.
 Her face is timeless and unaged,
 smooth like the butter
 she churns in the hearth of her
 well-kept home. Her beauty is simple
 and unadorned. She is eternally doe-eyed but
 fierce like a small lion ...
 NO—like a wild lamb!
 NO—more like an angry dove!
 with clipped ivory wings.

When Men Write About Women
 they are in lust.
 Her virginal cavity is unoccupied
 and quivering
 ready to be plundered...
 NO—wanting to be explored!
 NO—waiting to be destroyed!

When Men Write About Women
 there's always a giant dick
 scratching a womb
 caressing her moist bald mound
 reaching inside her trembling clitoris
is the clitoris inside?

Her soft body is always shaking
breathless and savage under
the weight of a throbbing member.

When Men Write About Women
there's always a climax
NO—a moment of pure ecstasy!
NO—a tiny death!

When Men Write About Women
it's often not for women.
It's often for bros.
It's often fantasy fiction.
NO—fantasy briction!
NO—bromantic broetry!

When Men Write About Women

HEROES DON'T EXIST

i've always sided with the monsters
ever since i was small.
i cared nothing for the hero's journey
their redemption their tears
their noble birth their warrior's
braid blowing in the wind on
the battlefield
their conquests of collected heads.
i was more concerned about what made
a monster a monster
than what made a man a god
and even more so,
what of the tears that monsters shed?
when i first heard the legend of Beowulf
i was 6. i was a strange child and
during recess, i would make the other kids
pretend we were in Hrothgar's hall.
i'd enter as Grendel,
troll-like with pointed teeth
and claws for hands. Grendel
only wanted to stop them from
making so much noise.
my favorite part was imagining
Grendel chowing down on
unsuspecting white men
in armor while they slept.

i cried when Beowulf sliced off Grendel's arm
and sent him whimpering back to the marsh to
die in his mother's arms.
Poor Grendel, i thought, he only wanted
a little peace & quiet.

DEAR DIARY

i kept a journal
in middle school
girls usually tended
to do that sort of thing,
now things don't seem
as serious as they once
upon a time did when i kept my words
inside a spiral notebook, wide
ruled by boys, both real and
fantasy fiction, i imagined a life
with DaVinci, DiCaprio, every white
man! i was something
else i did was write down all the
food deprivation, it's archived in
these lines that tell the story of
calories counted
my blessings, more like
cursed my dressings in this body black
mailed into believing that
i was too fat and too
ugly truth is it wasn't the
only thing i had in common with
other girls, white girls did it too,
rich girls did it too, kept those
secrets tucked away
for me to escape this world
of rage and sadness built
over pages and madness and
build my own world where there's
no poor me
writing to me, playing dress up
stairs in my room imagining
a different, a better life
time really moves so
fast through the pages
of this dear
diary,

WHITE GIRLS

*"A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment."—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye**

you lived long and well.
 first came the blond swig of curls
 cerulean irises, doe-eyed fawn falling
 head-first out of bloody orifice pink
 pussy hat crowning
 covered in viscera & smothered
 membrane, cherry-cheeked cherub
 bouncing in the lap of the world

i used to cry to be you, dismember
 you as i put myself back together
 patchwork pollyanna
 inventory the doll:
 swapping wool, blubber, tar for
 spindles of milky silk. *i thought about you*
& the taste of ants & peach pits & death

you lived long and well.
 beautiful for no reason
 but simply being
 feeding on the bra-burnt
 bare-breast bleeding heart
 of your mother, enchanted
 suckling sap

i tore the cotton from my scalp
 & sewed synthetic fibers through
 my skin, i let the blood drip down
 my face onto my perfect lips until they
 were puffy, bloody, ruddy

i gathered my sisters, called them
 from the four corners:
 Detroit, Memphis, Anacostia, Inglewood
 & we waited outside
 the high walls to be seen by you
 we clawed at the gates around your palace
 like invisible haints, screaming that we
 are magic.

BRONTË'S BIRD II

I turn inward sometimes
To preen my feathers.

I've been flying across the sea
In stormy weather.

I turn inward sometimes
And lick salt from my wings.

I wake to find they've been clipped
And it was all a dream.

THE THREE STORIES

Everyone who lived
in Oates Manor public housing
called it the The Three Stories.

It made sense
cause each of the units
had three floors.

And sometimes,
Oates Manor wasn't even called
the Three Stories

At least not by us who lived there,
we called it Scutterfield,
And it was more like a Scutter.
Field than an
Oates Manor.

But that's a different story.

My mama'nem grew up
on the second floor of The Three Stories
in an angry house, let them tell it.

True story:
they used to tell me The Three Stories
was built on top of an unmarked graveyard

where they buried the bodies of slaves
which isn't hard to believe, since
AUCTION Ave. ran right past Scutterfield

A while ago, they changed the name to A.W. Willis Ave.
as they tend to do,
cause in the South,
there's always two stories.

you know, separate but equal,
in school, they called the Civil War,
The War of Northern Aggression

But that's a different story.

Let my mama'nem tell it, their two bedroom unit
in the The Three Stories was full
with four kids, two adults and
the regular company of ghosts.

an old dark skinned woman who rocked back
and forth in a chair in
the corner of the kids bedroom humming

and downstairs there was a man
colored crimson in the fire
laughing for no reason

and then that one night, there was the one in the
wide-brimmed hat who ripped
the house apart fighting with my uncle

and sometimes they said they saw Ezekiel's wheel,
the big wheel moved by day,
the little wheel moved by the grace of God

and then there was Black Jesus in the painting
that every Black family had of the Last Supper
they said they could hear Him breaking bread
with His disciples and crying of their betrayal.

True story.

When the Housing Authority demolished
the projects (Oates Manor/The Three Stories/Scutterfield)
same story

and moved everybody out
and renamed AUCTION Ave. after a Black
man and built mixed income developments

replacing the brick and gray of
The Three Stories for condos
colored seafoam green,
pale peach, lavender fog and sky blue,

sometimes, my mama'nem would take us
to drive by to see the new houses
and we'd laugh...

look how white folks now live

in what used to be the projects
in what used to be Oates Manor
in what used to be Scutterfield
in what still is The Three Stories
in what used to be our home
in what used to be a graveyard where they buried the bodies of slaves.

True story.