



Search 



- [Home](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Store](#)

THE NIGGER KNOCKERS

By [Rion Amilcar Scott](#) - Feb 10, 2017



The knock, knock joke, much like the negro spiritual, began as a means of clandestine communication, a way for slaves to pass information to each other beneath the radar of hostile whites.

—Hiram Skylark Rollicks

Signifyn' Revolt: Black Rebellion in the Antebellum South

THE NIGGER KNOCKERS

My brain had liquefied for the night. That's what work, at least my job, does. Long day, short—makes no difference. Pop the top any weekday evening and you'll find a slushee. There I sat, zombified in that purgatory where rational thought and loopy subconscious visions mingle. A slack-jawed demon. Probably drooling. The glow of the nightly newscast projecting across my face.

I didn't recognize the shrill buzz of the doorbell at first. It buzzed loudly, louder than I remembered it being. A second buzz forced me to jump from my couch, landing on my feet and then toppling to the floor like I wore the legs of a scarecrow. Disoriented, I looked about trying to place everything: the disheveled living room with clothes and newspapers strewn about, the piercing buzz, the darkness. My head felt detached from my body as if floating. For a brief moment I existed outside time, and then I groped for the concept.

Another irritating buzz screeched from the front door. I stumbled through the living room to the entrance and peered through the peephole. I saw nothing and soon as I walked to the bathroom the buzz sounded again, long and loud like someone leaning on the button. After I finished, I returned to the foyer and looked out the window and again saw nothing.

I sat on the couch and rested my clearing head on a pillow and the doorbell buzzed again and again. I felt my nerves jangling. Racing to the door, I snatched it open and there stood no one. Nothing.

Cute, I yelled to the open air, the trees, the birds, the houses, the grass and the curve of the horizon. Very. Very. Cute. Now run along kids.

As I shoved the door closed, I heard cackling and saw a dark boot at the edge of the entryway. The door swung open and in walked a man I hadn't seen in years.

My nig-nig, he said as he walked into my living room with a bag over his shoulder. It was Tyrone James, my long lost childhood friend. What's up, Deez, he said, how's life treating you, man?

Deez was a nickname I had rarely heard after my first lonely semester at Freedman's University when I would see Tyrone around campus, but increasingly he and that stupid nickname faded from my life until I hardly saw him at all. I'd heard Tyrone had moved away and then back to Cross River after some years elsewhere.

Tyrone's entrance pissed me off more than a little, but his cocky half-smile, always defused things a bit. It said, Relax, It's all a bunch of bullshit, but it's not; except when it said, It's all serious, but it's really just a bunch of bullshit. He'd been that way since elementary school.

He made staying angry with him an impossibility. Though, for some reason that I can't understand and won't analyze, I felt the need to go through the motions.

What the hell is wrong with you? I barked across the room. Ringing the bell and hiding like a little kid? If I had a gun you would've caught one in your chest.

Relax Deez. You wouldn't shoot an old friend in the chest now would you? Man, I been here forever and you ain't even offer me nothing to drink yet?

I watched as Tyrone walked from the foyer into the kitchen where he snatched a twenty-two ounce bottle of Crazy Ninja Malt Liquor from the refrigerator door. This didn't bother me because the stuff tasted like piss and I only kept it in the fridge for guests, but other than my girlfriend, who didn't drink much, I hardly ever had guests. He took a long first sip and then turned to me and said, Want one?

I shook my head and returned to the couch. He parked himself next to me and we made small talk. He told me he was nearing the end of a doctoral program in Cultural Studies at Freedman's University. The school was still, as he put it, full of a bunch of bougie niggas and I told him I expected no different. He asked me when I planned to marry Sameeka and it surprised me that he remembered her, but I shrugged and changed the subject. We reminisced, comparing notes on people we had grown up with—Molly and Andreason and Shit-Shit and Cliff and Leonard who married Roxanne. I hadn't seen or heard from these people in years, most I hadn't even thought about. He wanted me to tell him about my work, but the less said about those gray cubicle walls that close in on me every afternoon, robbing me of oxygen and years of life, the better. After a long silence I said what I'd been thinking all along.

What's up doc, huh? Why you disrupting my life?

He reached into his bag and pulled out a neatly bound stack of pages with a shimmering plastic cover.

This right here is a draft of my dissertation. It's short, two hundred and fifty pages. I feel like I nailed it though. But shit, what do I know? I'm paying a fortune for a Ph.D in Cultural Studies so I can't be that bright.

I took the bound manuscript into my hands. It felt heavy. I looked at the title and fell into an amusement, a raw laughter so deep and pure that I was cleansed when it began to subside. *Nigger Knocks: A Brief Cultural History*.

You got to be kidding me man, I said. This is what you wrote your dissertation on? What's your next book on? Tag? Throw up and Tackle? Hide and Go Seek?

Yeah. See, that's the reaction I be getting most of the time, but people don't understand how important this *childhood game* (at this phrase he raised his fingers and turned them into quotation marks) has been to the development of this country. People never even stop to ask why it's called Nigger Knocks. As kids did we ever ask? Naw, we just knocked. It was fun too, right?

So why do they call it Nigger Knocks, professor?

Well, it started on plantations back in like the 1600s and shit, he said standing up and gesturing in front of me. I became the class and he, the instructor. Slaves used to knock on the Big House door and run. It was a way to steal food and weapons and shit; a way to help niggas escape through the Underground Railroad or the Forgotten Tunnel—man, they used it for all kinds of things. While white folks, or even a house slave, answered the front door, there'd be black folk taking bread and hog meat and shit out the back. Bet they ain't teach you about that at Freedman's University.

Naw, they didn't. That's actually interesting. Go on.

Look at you. Not giggling now. Give it a read. It's a quick read. At least I hope it is. If it doesn't grab you in the first fifty pages, you don't have to keep going. I've known you nearly all my life, I can trust you to be honest with me, right? Tell me it's trash if it's some trash. But don't mock my shit though. Don't take my scholarship for a joke.

He sported that mean little half-smile when he asked me not to ridicule him, so I wasn't sure how to take him. Perhaps it was a joke. Perhaps he was serious. I just didn't, and still don't, know.

I wasn't laughing though. Leafing through his manuscript, several passages caught my eye.

Tyrone took another Crazy Ninja for the road and before he left I agreed to read his book and give him comments.

I found myself busy that week so I gave it to Sameeka to read and she returned one night telling me that it amazed her that a clown like Tyrone could have such insight. Still I let the thing sit for two and a half weeks. Really I'm lying to myself when I claim that it was busy-ness that kept me from reading. Back then I mostly spent my free time surfing the internet for nothing in particular, fucking around on Facebook, occasionally remembering the manuscript (mostly when Sameeka mentioned it, which she did with an annoying frequency).

Tyrone called one day to tell me he would be coming the next night to collect his book. I panicked as I'm a man of my word, but then I sat in my lounging chair and in the pool of dim light that I prefer for reading, I gently turned the pages as if holding delicate parchment that could at any moment fall to pieces in my hand. I devoured it in a single sitting, reading long into the early morning hours when I should have been sleeping. I dragged my tired self to bed at five. My alarm sounded at 7:30 a.m. and the neighbor's dog started barking madly shortly after that. I raised my head from the pillow and then sank back into it, sleeping through the noise and found myself again late for work. Being late bothered me—really it did—but it concerned me less than it normally would as I cared more about Tyrone's manuscript than about my tardiness.

I found his words sublime. He wrote the kinds of sentences that tasted good in the mouth and passed like ice cream down the throat. For so many years Nigger Knocks had never even entered my thoughts and now my friend's words made the game into a shiny new thing.

Tyrone performed a kind of sleight of hand, somehow transporting me back to my childhood days. I could feel the knocks at my knuckles and on the palms of my hands. My old neighborhood, those plain Northside streets with their identical houses and neatly-trimmed lawns, now seemed foreign and exotic filtered now through the elegance of my friend's words.

Tyrone even mentioned me, though in passing, in one of his many recollections of running through the Northside of Cross River banging on doors and windows, pressing rapidly on doorbells and escaping into the day. Tyrone's book truly moved and changed me. He perfectly described the rubber soles slapping against the black tar beneath our feet; being chased by winded and out-of-shape adults; the days when we collapsed at our rendezvous points high with dizzying laughter.

He had convinced me. Nigger Knocks changed the world and I wouldn't want to live on a planet in which kids had never conceived of knocking on doors and racing away. Former slaves constructed this town one nigger knock at a time, to paraphrase my friend. What was once unknown to me now seemed obvious. I hadn't been just playing a *childhood game*. I was *participating in a tradition of rebellion, the same tradition of rebellion that lead (sic) to the abolition of slavery, the weekend and the forty-hour work week* (James 12).

When he arrived at my doorstep the next evening I sat in the lounging chair making frantic notes which I had started writing at work and continued at home, foregoing my usual nap. I had twenty handwritten pages and I could have composed twenty more. It annoyed me that when I answered the door, Tyrone hid himself in the bushes. I didn't want to play games. I wanted to discuss his brilliant work.

After he rose from the shrubbery and shook the leaves, the dirt and the twigs from his clothing, it took no longer than a moment for me to get to the heart of it all.

I've never, I paused. What kind of damn substances you on Tyrone? How do you even think like— I've never even read anything like this.

Damn, Deez. He shook his head and slumped a bit. That bad, huh?

Bad? No, this is the craziest—in a good way—shit I ever read.

Great, he said. Now we can go nigger knocking.

What?

It's time to go ring some bells, knock on some windows. Doorbell Ditch as the white boys would say.

But we're adults.

So?

Come on, Tyrone—how old are you? twenty-five?

Twenty-six.

What we look like— twenty-five and twenty-year-old men—running around nigger knocking?

The pursuit of freedom, he said misquoting himself, often begins with a rap on the door.

Around here? We'll get shot out here, jackson.

Look, I've made the mistake of writing this whole thing without even testing my theories. I'm on my way to becoming the typical academic. All brains, no balls. They encourage that over at good ol' FU, but that ain't me. No sir. Intellectuals have got to get out there and be with the people. Nigger knocking was one of the very first things our ancestors did to spark the Great Insurrection.

No shit, I replied. I read the manuscript.

Tyrone ignored me and kept talking.

They knocked on that door, hid out—he banged three times on my wall and crouched low by the side of the chair, acting it all out—and when old Master Johnny Weaver came outside looking, they stabbed that cracker right in the gut. The only successful slave uprising in this country—ever—started with some nigga knocking on a door and running away. Well, I guess he didn't run away; um, you see what I'm getting at. We have to do what the common folks do. If the people are Nigger knocking, I got to be Nigger knocking, too.

Tyrone's manuscript had set my brain ablaze and stirred long-dead urges. What I really wanted to do, had planned to do, was stay home and write something of my own despite having no clue as to what, if anything, I had to say. The uncertainty of it all gave me the excitement of a young drunk.

But for some reason, instead of staying home, I agreed to go out Nigger knocking with Tyrone.

He first picked a house in a quiet part of the Southside. I parked my beat up old thing at the far end of his street. It shook and rocked as I cut off the engine. We began slowly walking, almost tiptoeing to his door. I looked in the window and saw the outline of a man sitting in the dark lit only by the blue of his television. I whispered, He in there. I see him. He watching television.

I could glimpse his face in the dark through the glow of TV-light; he wore the worn expression of a zombie. Light, in waves, flashed across his cheeks. His lids hung low, tiny velvet curtains draped over his eyes. Tyrone and I crept to the door.

You ready? he asked. I nodded.

He pressed the bell several times while I made a fist and pounded with the meaty part of my hand.

By the way, Tyrone said. This is Shit-Shit's house.

Huh? That's Shit-Shit?

Man, Deez be quiet. You gonna ruin the element of surprise.

Who is it? Shit-Shit called.

He sounded anxious, angry. We said nothing, though we snickered.

Huh? I can't hear you. Who is it?

Tyrone rang once more and I banged, banged, banged as if trying to strike right through the door.

I could hear him stirring and we both jumped from his porch at the same time. We crouched in the dirt against the side of his house. He snatched open the door, stepped outside and looked left and right, but not down. I bit my lip and shook and dug my nails into my palms to avoid laughing. When he went back inside we waited for him to sit before we did it again. Once more he came outside and cursed his phantom nigger knockers. Shit-Shit's voice held an agitation I remembered from our teen years when we would invite him to Kenny's house just to pour buckets of water on him from the window above the front door. He always fell for it. Once we did it in October when the cold settled early. Snot poured from Shit-Shit's nose as he burst into a mighty rage, swinging his arms and inventing words to curse us with, blaming us for all the problems of his life from his poor grades to his loneliness.

We laughed even though it wasn't funny. And I was lonely too, but I didn't say so or offer any words to soothe him. Tyrone the instigator, instead of replying to Shit-Shit, in his sly way, urged me to do the mockery. He would reach deep into his witty brain to offer up a humorous putdown or a comedic approach which he would pass to me via whisper. He played the ventriloquist and I his willing puppet. This way Tyrone maintained his cool, above the fray image and I burnished my credentials as an asshole. At Tyrone's insistence, I tried to sound sincere because that was funnier. I told Shit-Shit that we weren't his problem, his hygiene was the problem and dousing him with water could only help, despite the fact that he had no hygiene problem, outside of that one day in junior high school. He kept coming back to Kenny's house fully aware of the cruelty waiting for him. In this way he became complicit in his own bullying.

The third time Shit-Shit came outside after we knocked, he waved his hands and spat and screamed, You fucking little kids! If I catch you around my house I'm gonna fuck you up, watch.

It was all so out of character—he added a false depth to his voice—which made it more hilarious. But then how would I know his character. I hadn't spoken to Shit-Shit—now calling himself Stephen or Steve, probably—in years. When he went back inside we tried one more time, though we didn't wait for him to come to the door. Instead, we immediately burst down the street toward the car. He yanked the door open and sprinted after us. He hadn't even bothered tying his shoelaces and they tapped against the concrete. I looked back just in time to see him trip and splash into a puddle.

We got into my car as he rose from the ground, a string of saliva and curse words spilling from his mouth. My engine cut off as I revved it and then it cut off again. We both wheezed heavily. I wondered how we would explain this to Shit-Shit when he caught up to us. Shit-Shit snatched a rock from the ground and lobbed it into the air as I pulled off. It was a nice throw too, because it smacked into the back windshield and cracked the thing pretty good. Tyrone and I jumped. The car swerved all over the road. When I got control of the thing we brayed and coughed, wiping mirthful tears from our eyes.

Nightly Tyrone appeared at my door, sometimes with a coffee cup in hand as if about to clock in for work and after a short chat we'd head out to do some nigger knocking. Houses with bushes always provided the best cover and we decided where to knock, partly, on how well the shrubbery could hide us. At one house, a man came out with a gun after four knocks. Crouching in his bushes, our mouths dry and our hearts beating in our throats, we didn't dare to even breathe. At another house we watched the police approach the door minutes after we finished with it.

We stomped some yellow marigolds out front of one house as we fled, by accident of course. We knocked on the door of a blue house on Gressam Place and Tyrone became so mesmerized by the woman who answered that he went back and knocked again just to get another glimpse at her. She came outside and looked around, thin arms folded delicately across her frame. Dark skin. Straight black hair. Beautiful indeed, but a bit skinny for my taste. She closed the door again and Tyrone said, My man, Darius I'm gonna marry her. Tyrone knocked again, but didn't run when she came outside for the third time. He pointed down the street at two kids tossing a football. Tyrone and the woman, sparked up a conversation and he left with her phone number. Her name was Zorya, but she called herself Zo and she made Tyrone feel like stillness, he said.

After they finished talking, Zo strode across the street and spoke to the mother of the football-playing children. As we walked away, a woman with a stern face and a mouth that turned down at the corners shouted, Get your little asses in here! Y'all earned an ass whooping tonight!

We had a good run, hitting different houses all throughout the Southside over the course of a couple weeks. We even hit Shit-Shit's house several times and the monster we made erupted over and over. It was hilarious to watch. The exhilaration of nigger knocking. I felt new life sprouting in my chest. We moved slowly north and even braved the rich folks and their security in gated Hilltop Heights. Tyrone kept saying that all we saw made good material for nightly revisions.

When Tyrone, one afternoon in my living room, said we had to move on, I nodded and leaned into the mattress atop my broken futon frame. This thing, as fun as it could be, was never meant to be everlasting, I knew that. It would be good to return to adulthood with the wisdom that could only come from traipsing briefly back into childishness; I fixed my mouth to thank Tyrone for the time, when he said: Port Yooga!

Huh?

That's where we moving on to. We did Hilltop Heights now it's time for Port Yooga. Enough of this petty little neighborhood shit. We need to knock the big time. Picture it, Deez, two niggas knocking Port Yooga doors. It'll be monumental. This shit needs its own chapter.

I cringed a bit thinking about it. The Southside was one type of danger, but it's rumored that Port Yooga once had its own hanging tree in the center of town. It was the only place a Cross Riverian was allowed after dark in Port Yooga for a time. I wanted to say no. My brain told my mouth to say no, but those excited infectious eyes of Tyrone's. How they danced in delight at all our knocking triumphs. I don't remember agreeing or walking to the car or most of the drive over. I remember though coming alive on the bridge to Port Yooga—apparently we had been laughing and planning. I asked myself what in the hell I thought I was doing, but still I was unable to turn around.

*

The following joke, or a version of it, was often told by slaves in the upper Southern states in the late 18th and early 19th centuries:

Knock, knock

Who's there?

Isaiah.

Isaiah who?

Isaiah whole lot of niggers tryna escape over the hills, boss. They thin' you cain't see they black asses flyin' through the night, but you can sees they eyes.

—Hiram Skylark Rollicks

Signifyn' Revolt: Black Rebellion in the Antebellum South

*

We drove about the neighborhood for a while planning escape routes and back up escape routes and backups to those routes in case something went really wrong. I kept saying, I'm not ending up on that fucking tree. Over and over I said it. I'm not ending up on that fucking tree. And when he couldn't take it anymore, Tyrone said, Deez, could you shut the fuck up? Park and let's do this already.

The world turned bluish around us as dusk fell.

We choose a big white house that seemed more appropriate on farmland than in this suburb. I knew it was a mistake from the start, but I didn't say anything. There rose an unbelievable sinking feeling from my stomach through my chest. I wanted to tell Tyrone to turn around, but how would that look?

He called knock-duty, and I would be the trusty lookout. I crouched at the concrete path that led to the door like a track star and faced the street.

I heard the banging behind me, Cross Riverian war drums followed by the rapid dinging of the bell. I shot off, the decoy preceding the greyhound. Somehow I must have gotten confused; I took one of the backup routes. And

when I tried to double back, I saw the darkened shadows of people roused out of their evening routines by our mischief. They dashed after Tyrone, a mob in pursuit. I continued along the backup escape route, a true failure as a lookout.

I ran along yards and through playgrounds and backyards. I ran and I gasped, my heart beating in my throat and my ears. I imagined my friend at the hanging tree, a nigger knocker dying for Nigger Knocks, just like our ancestors.

I made it to the car and circled the community for a half hour searching for Tyrone. Our victim's neighbors peered angrily into my car as I passed them. I heard some yelling and cursing. Somewhere dogs barked. I must have circled the same streets and the same madly searching people two or three times.

Finally, I came upon Tyrone James walking nonchalantly in front of a school. I flashed my headlights frantically. The flashing lights cast shadows upon my friend that looked just like a man dashing through the streets.

What the fuck, Deez? Tyrone called, as he snatched my door open. How you just gon—

I could be saying the same thing, jack; I thought you were right behind me, I lied. I took a backup route. You didn't see that the main route wasn't clear?

Fuck you, Deez. You got to communicate. Them fucking crackers was a stutter-step away from catching me. Tyrone sighed. That shit was exhilarating though.

I bet.

I knocked on a few more doors after I shook them.

Man, Tyrone, that's reckless as shit.

Tyrone smiled, pulled out a pencil stub and a little green notebook and he took notes silently all the way home.

*

This craftily designed joke is packed with information, telling a runaway slave who to rendezvous with (Isaiah, a codename no doubt); the path to freedom (over the hills); how fast to travel (fly, boy, fly); when to leave (at night); even the punishment for getting caught (a seizure of the eyes).

—Hiram Skylark Rollicks

Signifyn' Revolt: Black Rebellion in the Antebellum South

*

But what ended it all was something that happened on a day we couldn't go out, a Wednesday. I had to work late and Tyrone said he was meeting with his dissertation advisor, though I think he really went to see Zo. I would finally have the time to sit and write a little something of my own, I thought.

Easter just passed and everything, from the grass to the buds on the dogwood trees, were in the midst of re-birth. As the *Days & Times* described it, a teenager named Immanuel Richardson—a member of the only black family in the neighborhood—stood outside his house in Port Yooga late one evening ringing the bell for dear life. He had forgotten his keys that morning and asked his mother to stay up when he came home from his job at the grocery store. She tried gallantly, but his mother, Cynthia Richardson had worked a full day herself and fell asleep right there on the living room couch. Immanuel could see a bit of her through the window. He looked to his cellphone, but its battery had died on the walk home.

Annoyed and tired, he placed his backpack on the ground to ease the weight behind him. Almost as soon as he started to bang Immanuel heard some shouting behind him.

He turned slowly to see five men approaching him angrily. He recognized them as his neighbors and his tension eased. Mr. Thomas, Immanuel said. Can I use your—

Don't move, kid! Mr. Thomas shouted. He looked at Immanuel with no recognition, even though Immanuel had lived in the neighborhood for each one of his sixteen years. He had played with Mr. Thomas's kids. Once he washed his neighbors' cars for extra cash and ended up scratching Mr. Pickering's pink Pontiac. Now his neighbors watched him with stone eyes. Their faces glowed blue beneath the porchlights. Their mouths grew animated in rage and vulgarity. In the newspaper, the three neighbors who offered a comment said they had never seen Immanuel.

Immanuel's neighbors marched on him, petitioners protesting his existence. Immanuel ran. For his life Immanuel ran. Left his bag right there on his porch and Immanuel ran through the streets as the men chased. Help me! he cried. Someone please help me!

He stopped to knock on doors, but the men were right there at his heels forcing him each time to abandon that door. His knocks, at some houses, caused more people to come outside and join the mob. Immanuel dipped across lawns, backyards and through carports.

It wasn't long before one of the men caught him with a forearm to the neck. Immanuel's head hit the concrete. They kicked and punched him as he covered his face. More neighbors arrived raining more angry blows. Reading all about it, I wondered if poor Immanuel thought they would take him right to the hanging tree.

The police, his salvation for the night, showed up well into the beating and arrested him, charging him with attempted robbery, breaking and entering, battery and criminal mischief. Unfortunately for Immanuel, he needed the hospital far more than he needed the police station and when his mother finally got him into a hospital bed, he was in bad shape indeed.

Tyrone showed up on my doorstep the day the article was published holding the paper in his hand, a drained look seized his sunken eyes and his smirk was, for once, gone from his lips.

This ain't what was supposed to happen, jack. He shook his head. This wasn't part of the plan.

I invited him in and offered him a bottle of Crazy Ninja. We sipped and offered our theories. Tyrone recognized Immanuel's house as one he had hit during our night of terror in Port Yooga. Maybe Immanuel Richardson saw us, I offered; perhaps he was among those who gave chase.

Now, you're just reaching, Deez, Tyrone said. Something we got to face, my nig-nig: this nigga Immanuel Richardson took a beating that was meant for us.

That might have happened completely fucking independent of us, Tyrone. I don't think it has anything to do with nigger knocking.

Tyrone pointed to a sentence in the article quoting Immanuel's Uncle Carlo: *there's been string of [doorbell ditching] incidents around here lately.*

Well, I said. I mean— Look, do you think grown men beating the shit out of a teenager is the appropriate punishment for Nigger Knocks?

You just don't want to take any responsibility for any of this.

I didn't beat anybody, Tyrone. I just helped you add on to the body of scholarship about this topic and the shit was thrilling. Not to be cold, but this is another chapter. Maybe I can author it.

Man, Deez. Tyrone stopped, watched me for a beat and then sighed as if all the exhaustion in the world suddenly tumbled down upon him. I see, I can't talk to you about this. At least not now. He downed nearly half a bottle of that Crazy Ninja piss in one long gulp. I'll catch you a later when you had time to really think and shit. Peace, man.

Tyrone returned nearly every night and some nights, sitting on my couch, he would drink so much that I would have to carry him to my car and drive him to his parents' basement on the Northside where he lived.

He rarely mentioned his dissertation anymore and when he did he made fun of it.

One evening I tired of sitting around my place watching Tyrone get drunk, he suggested the café where Zo worked, and we spent that night sipping free tea and eating free pastries. We couldn't escape Immanuel Richardson, though. Tyrone held the front page of the *Days & Times*. A picture of the teen standing in front of his house splashed itself across the paper. He smiled. He'd smile forever. Tyrone passed his hand over the picture as if trying to absorb Immanuel Richardson through his flesh.

Zo slammed a hot porcelain kettle on our table before pouring the scalding water into our cups. She pointed to the paper, Who do these people think they are?

It's crazy, Tyrone said.

It's criminal is what it is, Zo replied. You guys coming out to the protest, right?

I don't know if I have six hours to hear Chairman R. speak, I said.

Hell yeah we're going, Tyrone said to Zo. We have to be out in force. We got to show these people this shit is not acceptable. Right, Deez?

I'm too old for protests, I replied. I thought I noticed looks of horror on their faces, but I turned away and said, Be safe Huey Newton; be safe Angela Davis. I'm gonna protest by nigger knocking all over Port Yooga, that's how I'm going to protest.

Why do you keep talking about Nigger Knocks? Zo asked.

Nigger knocking? Tyrone asked in reply. Everything I do from now on is nigger knocking. A nigga's knocking over the system that allows shit like this to happen—

That's your guilt talking, I replied.

Why would Tyrone need to feel—

Hey Deez, Tyrone said. We gotta get back so I can do some more work on this dissertation.

He stood, passed a quick kiss across Zo's cheek and nearly stomped from the restaurant. I followed, waving to Zo on the way out.

When we got to the sidewalk, I noticed Tyrone's face turn bitter and cold. He removed a bottle of Crazy Ninja from his jacket pocket and took his first sip for the night.

Look, Darius, he said. Never mention that nigger knocking shit in front of Zo, man.

She doesn't know that we—

No. How the fuck do you explain something like that? She's so passionate about getting justice for Immanuel. How do I explain that it's our fault that boy got beat, huh?

Easy, I said. You don't explain it, because it wasn't our fault. You want to protest? Let's organize a massive game of Nigger Knocks all around Immanuel Richardson's neighborhood. That's like two chapters right there. Let me author them. At least let's you and me go back to knocking.

Man, Deez, I'm through with nigger knocking. Through with school. Through with everything that can't fucking make justice happen.

Be for real Tyrone. You came to me with an amaz—

Besides, I have to go to this protest. Me and Zo haven't had sex yet and I think if I chant loud enough, she'll let me hit.

Tyrone, I don't care about your sex life. Your book is powerf—

Darius, man, niggas like you don't get it. That nigger knocking shit is irrelevant. Every word I wrote is irrelevant. I even knew that while I was writing. Cultural Studies is dumb. I only did it because my parents wanted me to. Fucking dissertation. You know what I did today? I took all my notes and every copy of that fucking dissertation and I tossed all of it off the Hail Mary Bridge and into the damn river. That shit looked like white leaves fluttering through the air on a fall day. That sound like poetry, right? Like some dumb shit I'd write in my dissertation.

He paused to sip greedily from his beer.

It was beautiful, man, he continued. You should have seen them sheets of paper doing flips. The only copy that exists is the one you got now and I'm asking you to give that one up so I can do the same thing with it.

No, it's too important, I said. That thing changed the way I think. Everything is different now. Brighter now. Naw, I ain't giving it up. No. Nope.

I'm sorry to tell you this Deez, I really am, but I made it all up. Every last word. Nigger Knocks is no more important than Jacks or Tag or Throw Up and Tackle. It was a gigantic practical joke on Freedman's University, on my parents. I wanted to see if anyone would notice. And no one did. Not my advisor. Not my peers. No one. Don't no one read these things. I'm sorry. I'm no genius. I was having some fun. Shit, it seems like the person I fooled most with this thing is you. I'm sorry, brah. I really am. It was all a joke, man.

Beads of tears sat in my eyes. I tried not to blink so they wouldn't fall and when I did blink, I turned from Tyrone.

Sorry man, he said feebly.

You're lying, I replied, matching his feebleness. Fifty pages of footnotes? Illustrations? Quotes from scholars?

All bullshit, my nig-nig. All bullshit.

He held out the bottle of Crazy Ninja to me as offering. You need this more than me, he said. I took the beer and swallowed four or five sips until a shallow pool of the pissbrew rested at the bottom of the bottle. Another

shallow pool burned within my gut.

I got to go, jack, Tyrone said patting me on the shoulder and walking past me. I'm sorry, chief. I'll pick up my dissertation tomorrow.

*

Slaves made sure to tell their jokes to their owners while their comrades were within earshot. There was a certain excitement in listening to the sweet laughter of a slaveholder, for the slave knew that his owner was chuckling at his own downfall.

—Hiram Skylark Rollicks

Signifyn' Revolt: Black Rebellion in the Antebellum South

*

I heard nothing from Tyrone for several weeks, but then there was a brief and strange phone call the night that the grand jury declined to charge the neighbors for beating Immanuel Richardson. And the charges against Immanuel? Didn't slow one bit. They were moving forward with the force and speed of a locomotive and if the state had any say, Immanuel would spend the next several years in prison. Of course, all of this weighed heavily on my friend. He sounded drunk on the phone, his voice full of slurring fire and thunder. It made me feel that the Earth had cracked at the center and now crumbled into its core. I couldn't make out all he said, though I was flattered he chose me for his drunk call.

This is some bullshit, he said. That fraud ass Chairman is calling for peace. I want a piece of them bitchass neighbors.

Don't do nothing stupid, I said. Stop drinking all that Crazy Ninja. How about a round of Nigger Knocks?

You still on that? How about I go and nigger knock them neighbors' teeth in?

Go home, write a poem or something about this night and include it in the dissertation.

You don't ever give up, do you Deez? Hey how's this for poetry? So much depends on a red brick crashing through the window of a racist neighbor's house.

He hung up and I walked over to my reading chair and sat with his manuscript for several hours. It struck me as impossible that he could make up such rich detail. That such a beautiful idea could be nothing but a fabrication. Sameeka called and we talked for a bit. She suggested I go and find my friend, but I told her that it wasn't what he wanted.

Just after midnight he turned up on my doorstep, his lip busted, his right eye purpled and raised and his knuckles scuffed.

I brought him ice for his eye and his lip. He sat at the round table in my kitchen and threw his head back.

Look at you! I exclaimed. Didn't I tell you not to do anything stupid?

I went back there, Deez, I had to.

Where? What are you talking about?

Immanuel's neighborhood. I had to. Someone had to know. I saw Immanuel's Uncle Carlo standing outside smoking a cigarette—

You didn't.

I stuck out my hand and he took it, dapping me up good with the strongest soul brother shake you could ever imagine. Told me he appreciated all the support from the community. Told him I was from Cross River and, guess what, he lives here too, except now he spends all his time in Port Yooga looking out for his sister and his nephew. We got quiet, man. Real quiet. That's when I told him everything.

Tyrone shifted his weight in the chair and moved the bag of ice from his eye to his lip and then back to his eye before speaking again.

I told him about Nigger Knocks and the dissertation; about that night, everything about that night. You should see this nigga; like ten stories tall, the face of a bull. He pitched his cigarette at me. That shit sparked like fireworks on my jacket and when I was looking at the cigarette he took a swing at me.

Goddamn.

Yeah. I don't know how long it lasted him beating my ass. The neighbors came and he got into it with them too. I ran. Don't think I stopped till I got here.

I sat there not saying a word, just studying the monstrosity in my living room as he spewed madness.

Immanuel's neighbors still roaming free, I said. Immanuel's still facing charges. Still got bills his family got to come out they pocket for. You may feel good, but it's not justice though.

Fuck you, Deez. I'm free now. I ain't got this shit weighing on my shoulders. Nothing to feel bad about. Nothing to prove to nobody. I did the honorable thing. I'm free.

What about the dissertation? I pointed to the only existing copy on my kitchen table.

Tyrone rose and took the book into his hands. He flipped through the pages, chuckling a bit and then he walked toward the door. He knocked on it three times before opening it and stepping out into the world.

Man, fuck a dissertation, he said turning back toward me. I don't know whether I'll burn this thing or drown it in the river. We don't need it anymore. We got the thing that's gonna save us, all of us, everybody. That's sincerity.

He walked out and I shut the door behind him. I felt my heart sink from sudden loss, pangs of grief piercing my side. And then there hung inside me a lightness. I wrote for a while, longhand as the computer reminded me so much of work and I didn't, at the time, often use the vintage typewriter I kept dusted and polished on a desk in my bedroom. Tyrone had brought my life's work into sharp relief. I had to rebuild the dissertation from the ground up, but also now that my friend had been turned into a monster by his newfound sincerity, I needed to remake the book in my own image. What I wrote took on a formlessness. It grew flowing, meandering and strange—bits of philosophy, aborted narratives starring Tyrone and Darius, doodles both pornographic and childlike, voices that passed through my head, cryptic jokes only I could get. It surprised me, but I knew that one day it would all come together. Sometime around 3 a.m., I ran into a barrier as solid as a door up against my balled fist. Every word I ever knew fled me. I took a walk.

I decided that night as I strode through the Southside on my way to Shit-Shit's house that I wouldn't answer the door the next time Tyrone came nigger knocking. I had my manuscript, what else from him did I need? There were secrets in that book that had yet to be discovered. If I never saw him again that would be fine.

Still, I imagined my friend by my side as I stood on Shit-Shit's porch. Other than me, only a few rats stirred. You ready? I said to Tyrone and to no one at the same time. I tapped four quick and heavy blows against the door and waited for it to open.

Rion Amilcar Scott's work has been published in journals such as The Kenyon Review, Crab Orchard Review, PANK, The Rumpus, Fiction International, The Washington City Paper, The Toast, Akashic Books, Melville House and Confrontation, among others. A story of his earned a place on the Wigleaf Top 50 (very short) Fictions of 2016 and 2013 lists, and one of his essays was listed as a notable in Best American Essays 2015. He was raised in Silver Spring, Maryland and earned an MFA from George Mason University where he won both the Mary Roberts Rinehart award and a Completion Fellowship. He is a Kimbilio fellow. His short story collection, Insurrections (University Press of Kentucky) was published in August 2016 and was chosen for The Rumpus's Book Club. Wolf Tickets is forthcoming from Tiny Hardcore Press. Presently, he teaches English at Bowie State University.

Find him on twitter: [@ReeAmilcarScott](https://twitter.com/ReeAmilcarScott)

[Previous post](#)

[Something Great About The Sun](#)

[Next post](#)

[Album Reviews of 1994](#)

© Copyright 2020 New York Tyrant. All Rights Reserved. contact@nytyrant.com