August 1619: A ship arrives in Point Comfort, Va., carrying more than 20 enslaved Africans, the first on record to be brought to the English colony of Virginia. They are among the 12.5 million Africans forced into the trans-Atlantic slave trade, their journey to the New World today known as the Middle Passage.

Over the course of 350 years, 36,000 slave ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean. I walk over to the globe & move my finger back & forth between the fragile continents. I try to keep count how many times I drag my hand across the bristled hemispheres, but grow weary of chasing a history that swallowed me.

For every hundred people who were captured & enslaved, forty died before they ever reached the New World.

I pull my index finger from Angola to Brazil & feel the bodies jumping from the ship.

I drag my thumb from Ghana to Jamaica & feel the weight of dysentery make an anvil of my touch.

I slide my ring finger from Senegal to South Carolina & feel the ocean separate a million families.

The soft hum of history spins on its tilted axis. A cavalcade of ghost ships wash their hands of all they carried.

By Clint Smith