

Black Summers

Face pressed
Against thick thighs
Hands held high
And mouth agape
To wait
For thick slabs of jowl bacon,
Salty rice
And fried eggs.
Lines of chili peppers
Hang on the wall;
Peaches pop
Into hot waiting mouths.
Strings of beans
Running around Grandma's garden,
We dig for red and white sweet potatoes
Like we're diggin' for gold.
Summer is
My memory of you
Standing at a stove
Held closed by a stick
And an old leather belt,
Lit by matches
and burnt fingers.

Nicholson Hill

Deep, deep
In the forest of Mississippi
Where the real Mississippi lives
Is a cemetery,
It's lines erased by trees
and blackness,
Filled with decaying
Mostly decayed bones
And teeth
And sinew.

A girl walks by
Seventeen and almost married
Dirt poor and no shoes.
She comes to the plantation
Where her ancestors
Lived and died and never left.

She digs through the earth with her hands
And plucks out eyes -
Brown, sharp eyes -
A curved nose with wide nostrils,
Straight, white teeth,
Black, black hair with a hint of injun,
A backbone threaded with steel, strengthened by the lash
And calloused feet that would never go bare.
She eats the red, graveyard dirt
Drenched in our blood.
She chews and swallows
Then licks her teeth.
With her hands, she forms this child in her womb
So she can take her family with her.
She is the first to leave this plantation,
The only home they've known since -

She stands up and carries
A child with a chance to survive.
And she walks to Arkansas
Then Missouri
Then Illinois.
And Mississippi is always with her.

Chalk Lines

Let us draw ourselves
Outside the lines that limit us,
Outside the chalk lines
That display us
Laid out on the pavement

Shot down by the truth
That our lives don't matter

Old Gods

We rolled over our gods
First with wagons
And scythes to the grain.
Then we dug into the earth
For black gold
And coughed up black smoke.
We threw garbage into river mouths
Choked their air
And clogged their veins of clay

Costume

My culture is not a coat
Or a hat
That you can try on.
It is not a tan that fades over time.
It is not a fun new eyeshadow.
It is not a phase
Or a tool for rebellion.

It is blood
And bone,
Chains on my wrists
And a rope around my neck.
It is ritual dances
And worship of our mothers.
It is everything
And nothing to you.