

## Summer Migration

It's the summer migration.  
Time to fold ourselves tightly into cars.  
We drive north to go South,  
We leave the safety of our dreams,  
To drive deep into fears.

We turn corners in small towns,  
Shuttered windows,  
Rusted tractors, watchful eyes,  
Furrowed brows, sour mouths,  
And fallen cities of bygone times.

We lurch and sputter into thick forests,  
Unpaved roads and handmade signs.  
Neighbors wave flags to not forget,  
The southern disruption,  
The dismantling of institutions.

We pass weathered shacks,  
Museums, silent and haunting,  
Now for remembering,  
Or maybe to remind,  
Where to step,  
And how to keep in line.

We drive up to humble homesteads,  
Paint peeling, leaning on ancient foundations,  
Bought with green pennies in cloudy jars,  
Years of saving yielded deeds,  
Refuge, belonging, hope.

We remove shoes on hallowed ground,  
Our brown feet touch red earth,  
Warmed by yellow sun, soaked in black blood.  
We remove hats, turn down music,  
We hush laughter and stare out over fields.

Stalks of cotton sway and sing,  
Whisper greetings,  
From the Ancestral Plane,  
They are glad we're here.  
We give thanks to those who drew maps,  
Fashioned quilts, read constellations,  
Gave us a way out,  
To live.

So we come back each year.  
We break bread and we dance,  
We pour out wine and beat drums,  
We sing hymns and touch hands,  
We are filled with the Spirit,  
And renewed in our hope.

When the time is done,  
We depart,  
The trail of dust, a curtain closing,  
Keeping safe our ritual until we return again.

### **Out With Evil**

White pastor says,  
"Invite not evil into the home",  
The warlocks,  
The witches,  
The African religions.

So out they went!  
The joyful children's stories,  
With pumpkin patches,  
Wands and wonders.

Into the wind,  
Got tossed,  
Along with incense,  
A tiny tom-tom with taught leather,

A piece of obsidian.

Out with the wooden kinara,  
Carved by Uncle,  
Grandma's medicine bag,  
Her Florida water,  
A bottle of melted snow,  
Sand from Ghana,  
Feathers, beads.

And then the washing.  
Wash 'til white,  
Cover everything  
In white,  
Make it clean,  
Darkness can't exist in heaven.

### **Prayer Room**

Finding faith on the floor,  
That penny heads up,  
And the stomping of feet on hardwood,  
And the laying of hands  
On myself.

Gospel music with the bass turned up,  
The shaking windows,  
And pounding on walls.

The prayers.  
Oh, the prayers!  
They bounce from ceiling,  
To wall,  
To floor,  
To baseboards.  
They fill up the room like the smoke  
Of sacred incense.

## **On Easter Morning**

Relax your neck,  
After sleeping with your head  
Propped up all night.  
Inspect your candy curls,  
Make sure they are still in place.

Stuff yourself into itchy stockings,  
Polyester, taffeta, a powder blue frock.  
Adorn your hands in white gloves  
With pearled buttons.  
Can't eat and ruin your dress,  
*"You must wait!"*  
Sip water and listen,  
To your tummy protest.

At the toot of a horn,  
Skip outside,  
Pile into the church van,  
Take in the scent  
Of sweat, baby powder,  
Peppermint  
The oil of anointing,  
Pull up to the front,  
Of the white church building,  
Lift your head to see  
The bell that doesn't ring.

Go inside,  
Fill in the front pew,  
Hide your bony knees,  
With a white handkerchief,  
Sit on half of Nanny's left thigh,  
As a full-bodied woman orders you  
*"Make room!"*

Bow your head during Devotion,  
Stare down at your hands,  
Humming the words you don't know.  
Listen to The old deacons whine,  
Their shaky moans,  
Sound like ghosts.

March to the front with other children,  
Recite your memorized verse,  
As your toes curl in shiny shoes,  
Cameras flash,  
Congregants coo.

Sit through an hours-long sermon,  
Watch the preacher,  
Pat sweat from his forehead,  
And miss the greasy drippings,  
Sliding down the back of his neck.

Nod off and feel Nanny pinch your arm,  
When your head rolls,  
Giving you away.  
Hear the choir sing loud, and then louder  
Until nanny bumps you off her thigh,  
And springs out of her seat, arms flailing,  
Seized by the Spirit, body quivering.  
Watch the ushers,  
Press down on her shoulders  
Until she sits, fanning her,  
The front of her wig lifted,  
Revealing curly white edges.

Feel your aching stomach,  
Yearn for Sunday dinner.  
Before the final prayer,  
Witness an impromptu wedding,  
A testimony of healing,  
And the dedication of a baby,  
Stand for the Benediction.

Play in the aisles with Daisy,  
From down the street,  
Until Nanny threatens a whipping  
*“Stop foolin’ in God’s House!”*  
Pile back into the church van,  
With the old folks,  
Bodies more sweaty,  
White, hungry mouths are stale.

Be the last drop off, but grateful to be home,  
Remove each piece,  
Of your ceremonial garment,  
Carefully put it away.  
Know that you will wear it again,  
For the Ladies Day program,  
And Children’s Sunday.

Put on play clothes,  
Your favorite yellow t-shirt,  
With faded blue shorts.  
Run toward the delightful smells,  
Coming from big silver pots in the kitchen.  
Hang your head when Nanny tells you,  
*“Sit down somewhere and wait!”*  
All the uncles, aunties and cousins,  
will be here soon.

Go outside, sit on the front porch,  
Watch the sugar ants,  
Crawl around your naked toes.  
Wonder where your mother is today,  
Wish that she would come get you,  
take you out for a burger,  
You are hungry,  
And are tired of being told to wait.

## The Native Daughters

The Native Daughters  
Eventually, they come home  
With the world at their backs  
A train of degrees flowing behind  
Embellished with new letters  
Before and after their beautiful names  
The children they've birthed  
Draped around their necks  
Like strings of dark pearls  
Shining jewels clinging to ankles  
And trimming their skirts.

With dust on their feet  
Returning to streets  
Where they reigned  
At barefoot racing  
Dance battles, bike tricks  
Hopscotch, helicopter,  
Horse, hide-and-seek,  
Double dutch and talking smack.  
As they strut into town  
Dark pavement rumbles  
Bringing neighbors to windows  
Look, she's back!

Ain't that her  
The granddaughter, lil' cousin,  
Sister of, best friend  
Remember when  
She used to be so quiet  
Always had a book in her hand  
Remember when  
She beat that girl up in 10th grade  
Remember when  
She got caught kissing behind the church  
Remember when  
She got pregnant from that ol' no good boy

Remember when  
Remember when  
Remember when  
Yeah, they remember  
Remember when ya'll  
Dragged their names through the mud  
Tossed them into the wind  
And the rumors swirled  
Blew this way and that  
Blew them right out of town  
But here they come  
Right on back.

Walking tall  
Heads high  
Arms dangling  
Muscles taugt  
Adorned with crowns  
Returning home as  
Professor, Hustler, Doctor  
Designer, Diva, Esquire  
Boutique owner  
Child care maven  
Hair layer, fashion slayer  
Nail tech, Clerk, Journalist  
Singer, Reverend  
Playwright  
Poet  
Their pockets full  
And their pride is golden.

Oh, and how the people wagged their tongues!  
Chile, them folks couldn't stop flapping their gums  
I used to teach her, you know?  
I watched her on weekends  
When her daddy went missing



When her momma worked nights  
When they lost the house  
When she got in trouble  
I was there  
It was me  
I helped give birth to all of these.

They held out their palms  
To touch, to feel  
Grab a-hold  
Is she even real?  
This woman  
Who we thought  
would never  
Couldn't even  
Should not  
But she did  
That and then some.

They are real.  
Almost too high to reach  
So folks, just gaze  
Speechless at the sight  
Of these stars  
That have burst forth  
They are their own constellation  
They are a whole universe  
So go on  
Orbit  
Gather round  
Gaze and wonder.  
Your Native Daughters  
Have returned.