

Crystal Wilkinson's Terrain inserted into James Still's Heritage

by Crystal Wilkinson and James Still

(as arranged by Frank X Walker)

I shall not leave these prisoning hills
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.
Though the waters of Troublesome, of Trace Fork,
Of Sand Lick rise in a single body to glean the valleys,
To drown lush pennyroyal, to unravel rail fences;
Though the sun-ball breaks the ridges into dust
And burns its strength into the blistered rock
I cannot leave. I cannot go away.

the map of me can't be all hills and mountains even though I've
been geographically rural and country all my life. The twang in my
voice has moved downhill to the flat land a time or two. My taste
buds have exiled themselves from fried green tomatoes & rhubarb
for goats' milk & pine nuts. Still I am haunted by home. I return
to old ground time and again, a homing black bird destined to
always return. I am plain brown bag, oak and twig, mud pies & gut
wrenching gospel in the throats of old tobacco brown men. When my
spine crooks even further toward my mother's I will continue to crave
the bulbous twang of wild shallots, the gamey familiarity of oxtails
and kraut boiling in a cast iron pot.

I toe-dive in all the rivers seeking the whole of me, scout virtual African terrain
trying to sift through ancestral memories, but still I'm called back home
through hymns sung by stout black women in large hats and flowered dresses.
I can't say the landscape of me is all honeysuckle and clover cause there have
always been mines in these lily-covered valleys. You have to risk the
briar bush to reach the sweet dark fruit, and ain't no country woman
all church and piney woods. There is pluck and cayenne pepper. There
is juke joint gyrations in the youngun-bearing girth of this belly and
these supple hips. All roads lead me back across the waters of blood
and breast milk, from ocean, to river, to the lake, to the creek, to
branch and stream, back to the sweet rain, to the cold water in the
glass I drink when I thirst to know where I belong.

Being of these hills, being one with the fox
Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal,
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending,
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.
Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond.

Note: "Heritage" by James Still was printed in the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* (1984) and is currently available in *The Wolfpen Poems*, Berea College Press (1986). "Terrain" by Crystal Wilkinson was published in *Appalachian Heritage* (2008).