Mules

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De nigger woman is de mule uh de world
... so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams
of whut a woman oughta be and to do
... nothin' Ah been through ain't too much
if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed
-Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston

In the day, they plow through ashen soil,
nourishing the ground they dwell on,
grappling the terror of their existence,
withstanding empty praise and
condescending worship for
fulfilling involuntary promises-enduring
the taunts of unwelcome aliases, the mammies
and ainties of ungrateful offspring-a womanhood
diminished to demeaning titles.
At night, they abuse their children with
loving intonations so they too will
inherit the resilience necessary for
survival.

They blossom secretly to
avoid unwanted desire, but
knowing the inevitable will occur.
They quietly acquire knowledge-a
wisdom of ancient teeth, but play down
their significance in the face of certain
company. Ravaged and used for being
dark as the night that watched them,
they brushed earthen prints from punished
skin and resumed their spiritual mission.
They avert eyes and instinct to kill
as their screaming young are taken
from aching arms and every inch
of the valley between their thighs is
stripped of life.
The pain of pretending settled and found its home in their violated hips and asses and formed gout and swelling in the worn feet and ankles on which they remain standing. They bled their sacrifices so that my sisters and I could have a seat, but even now I can't help feeling the itch of hay between my gums.