

Carolyn Beard Whitlow is Dana Professor of English at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC, where she has taught Creative Writing and African American Literature since 1993. Finalist for the 1991 Barnard New Women Poets Prize and the 2005 Ohio State University Poetry Prize, she published her first poetry collection, *Wild Meat*, in 1986 with Lost Roads. Her most recent book, *Vanished*, won the 2006 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award. Whitlow is also a visual artist and quilter whose work can be found at <http://colorquiltsbycarolyn.squarespace.com/>.

A Mule and 40 Acres Suite

1. Deducting the Furnish

X-signed contract on a small tract of land
 Seeds on consignment from the planter store
 Rent due on the shack with one door
 End of the year earn less than you owe

X-signed contract on the same tract of land
 Clothes on consignment from the planter store
 Rent due on the shack with one door
 End of the year earn less than you owe

X-signed contract, tired tract of land
 Owe two years more at the planter store
 Rent due on the shack with no door
 End of the year earn less than you owe

End of next year earn less than you owe
 End of your life earn less than you owe

2. Guano

Once the ground is broken between the rows
 by freed men harnessed to their wooden plows,

—heads covered—against the rising fertile dust
 blown from neck-held haversacks—a must—

the pungence scatters even when the wind stills
 enough to raise pink blossoms on the hills

of earth drawn up to keep the boundless weeds
 at bay, laying by the covered seeds

that burst sackful into cotton bolls

ripenened for earthy black fingers to unfold.

3. Drownin in de Sun
(Sharecropper Song)

Sun's out but it be strugglin',
Say 'Gimme a lil time . . .'

Workin de ground in de sun Lawd
Workin de sun hard ground
Sun goin down goin under Lawd
Sun drowneded goin down
Drownin sun goin under Lawd
Lawd sun all de way down

Wanna res my bones weary in de cool,
Heat cooked me outa bed—

Workin de ground in de sun Lawd
Workin de sun hard ground
Sun goin down goin under Lawd
Sun drowneded goin down
Drownin sun goin under Lawd
Lawd sun all de way down

Caught in a sunstorm, wind howlin bad
Sun blowed lika fiah cross de lan—

Workin de ground in de sun Lawd
Workin de sun hard ground
Sun goin down goin under Lawd
Sun drowneded goin down
Drownin sun goin under Lawd
Lawd sun all de way down . . .

4. Summer Sundays

—bright head-handkerchiefs
whitest of aprons—

march in procession

one hundred fifty