

I play it cool
And dig all jive.
That's the reason
I stay alive.

My motto,
As I live and learn,
is:
Dig And Be Dug
In Return.

-Langston Hughes

i. dig

old selves re-turn over here
marked in a language of smudge and edge
broken stones and footsteps sunk in clay

no one questions the color of the soil
or how to reclaim all our blood left here
or how and if to keep walking

new ground

ii.

you see how they skinned the mountains
like god's knees were nothing
like we weren't laid out
backs praying
for depth above and the strength to stand

naked roots remind us
there are different ways to dig

iii.

i thought if i thrust my hands
seven layers down
you would wake up
say, girl don't worry, it's not your turn yet
go back to sleep

but you only yawned
said
look. i love you. and you know your fingernails are dirty too.

new ground

iv.
volunteer plants take over my heart
ancestors choose pathways
that used to be about capillary breathing

wake me up in the morning
so light is more
than the coincidence of noticing

dig?

v.

if i could smooth away every promise we made
and rake this dust thumb-width
i would bury our embarrassment of tokens
and press my face to rest
but i am too tired
to sleep here alone

vi.

if i was honest
i'd be invisible
every pore refilled with brown lime
out of some unvisited grave
that we can't find
because nobody has written about her yet

v.

but
i wrote this for you with a shovel
holding days i don't want to remember
in my teeth
i dug this for you with my mouth
eyelashes catching fossils
waiting for you to come home

this is new ground.

by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (*written for the 15th Anniversary of Southerners on New Ground*)