

Pilgrimage by Natasha Trethewey (1966)

Here, the Mississippi carved
its mud-dark path, a graveyard
for skeletons of sunken riverboats.
Here, the river changed its course,
turning away from the city
as one turns, forgetting, from the past—
the abandoned bluffs, land sloping up
above the river's bend—where now
the Yazoo fills the Mississippi's empty bed.
Here, the dead stand up in stone, white
marble, on Confederate Avenue. I stand
on ground once hollowed by a web of caves;
they must have seemed like catacombs,
in 1863, to the woman sitting in her parlor,
candlelit, underground. I can see her
listening to shells explode, writing herself
into history, asking what is to become
of all the living things in this place?
This whole city is a grave. Every spring—
Pilgrimage—the living come to mingle
with the dead, brush against their cold shoulders
in the long hallways, listen all night
to their silence and indifference, relive
their dying on the green battlefield.
At the museum, we marvel at their clothes—
preserved under glass—so much smaller
than our own, as if those who wore them
were only children. We sleep in their beds,
the old mansions hunkered on the bluffs, draped
in flowers—funereal—a blur
of petals against the river's gray.
The brochure in my room calls this

living history. The brass plate on the door reads
Prissy's Room. A window frames

the river's crawl toward the Gulf. In my dream,
the ghost of history lies down beside me,

rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.