

WILLIAM KELLEY WOOLFITT

Tongueless

Think of the pine woods, men who strike bark
with chipping knives, given over to their work

as if bewitched, none speaks or turns to look.
Think of the camp boss on a horse with lifted ears,

escorting Zora Neale Hurston, who means to collect
songs and lies. *Up in his face asking to be talked to,*

she wrote. Think of wounds in living trees, gum oozy
and viscous, the good soft drip, thin and light, cream,

almond, pale yellow. *Black men whose swift strokes
bleed the pines for gum,* she wrote. Think of trees

cat-faced, the gouges diagonal, whiskery, cicatrixed.
The chippers don't make up songs, the boss tells her.

These are lonesome woods, he says. Think of threats,
shanties, beatings, commissary bills. All she hears:

the slash of knives, bark chips shifting underfoot,
men who grunt, sigh, exhale, keeping time perhaps,

perhaps whistling a few cautious notes, maybe not,
little sounds, the drip of scars, the silence of trees.