

EMMETT TILL

1

river jordan run red

rainfall panes the bottom acreage—rain  
black earth blacker still

blackness seeps in seeps down  
the mortal gravity of hate-inspired poverty  
Jim Crow nidus

(nest)

*the alabama the apalachicola the arkansas the aroostook  
the altamaha*

killling of 14-year-old  
stirs nation. there will be a public wake

works its way underground  
scarred landscape veined by rage  
sanctified waters flow  
go forth

*the bighorn the brazos*

along roan valley walls blue rapids  
wear away rock  
flesh current quickly courses thru  
the front page news amber fields purple mountains  
muddies

*the chattahoochee the cheyenne the chippewa the cimarron  
the colorado the columbia the connecticut the cumberland*

waftage

spirit uplifted eyes head heart  
imitation of breath chest aheave

that grotesque swim up the styx  
level as rainwater culls into its floodplain

*the des moines*

blood river born

2

ebony robe aflow  
swathed hair of the black madonna  
bereft of babe

*the flint*

that hazel eye sees  
the woman  
she fine mighty fine  
she set the sun arising in his thighs

*the hudson the humboldt the illinois*

and he let go a whistle  
a smooth long all-american hallelujah whistle  
appreciation. a boy

*the james the klamath*

but she be a white woman. but he be  
a black boy

*the maumee the minnesota the mississippi the missouri  
the mohican*

raping her with that hazel eye

*the ohio*



make some peckerwood pass water mad  
make a whole tributary of intolerance

*the pearl the pecos the pee dee the penobscot  
the north platte the south platte the potomac*

vital fluid streaming forth in holy torrents

think about it. go mad go blind  
go back to africa go civil rights go go

*the red the white the green*

run wine

3

silt shallows the slow sojourn seaward

they awakened him from sleep  
that early fall morning  
they made him dress  
they hurried Emmett down to the water's edge

*the roanoke*

after the deed  
they weighted him down  
tossed him in  
for his violation

*the sacramento the salt the san juan the savannah  
the smoke*

from the deep dank murk of consciousness a birth  
oh say do you see the men off  
the bank dredging in that  
strange jetsam

*the tennessee the trinity*

a lesson  
he had to be taught—crucified (all a nigger  
got on his mind) for rape by eye that  
wafer-round hazel offender plucked out  
they crown him

*the wabash*

cuz she was white woman virtue and he  
be a black boy lust

*the yazoo the yellowstone*

oh say Emmett Till can you see Emmett Till  
crossed over into campground

spill tears  
nimbus threatening downpour  
sweetwater culls into its soulplain

come forth to carry the dead child home

4

*at my mouth forking*

autumn 1955, lord!  
kidnapped from his family visit  
lord!  
money road shanty  
lord!  
his face smashed in  
lord! lord!  
his body beaten beyond cognition

river mother carries him



laid in state  
sovereign at last

that all may witness true majesty  
cast eyes upon

*murder*

the youth's body too light  
was weighted down in barbed wire & steel

dumped into the river agape a ripple a wave  
(once it was human)

aweigh. awade in water. bloated  
baptized

and on that third day awaft  
from the mulky arm of the tallahatchie  
stretched cross cotton-rich flats  
of delta

*on that third day  
he rose*

and was carried forth to that promised land

Listen to Wanda Coleman reading Emmett Till from the  
recording High Priestess of Word

