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

killing 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 acheave

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