

RENÉE WATSON

A Psalm for Emmett Till

The brutal abduction and murder of 14-year-old African American Emmett Till in Mississippi on August 28, 1955, galvanized the emerging Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. called his murder "one of the most brutal and inhumane crimes of the 20th century." – Biography

But what I don't know is your favorite color, or your favorite bubble gum flavor. I don't know if you liked winter days, if you ever left the imprint of your body in the snow to make an angel. And I want to know the song that you couldn't stop listening to, singing it in your head, over and over. What was the song? I want to know the games you liked to play, if you ever climbed a tree, swam in a lake, looked up at the night sky and made a wish. And I want to know who you thought you might become. Your mother told us you were good at science, that you loved art. I wonder if you had lived, would your masterpieces be in a gallery or maybe you would have kept them to yourself—hidden treasures in a notebook, or maybe you would have been an art teacher. Or maybe you would have been a baseball player. I am told you were good at that, too. So many talents, raw and pliable. There is a tale told of you baking a cake for your mother and you were young and boy and not good at baking, but still, you loved your mother, so you tried. The cake did not taste good at all, and that became a family joke. Had you lived, you might have gotten better at baking. And maybe you would have become a renowned pastry chef and every time you'd be interviewed, you'd tell the story of the horrible cake and you'd look back at how far you'd come, at how much you'd grown. Maybe. These are things I do not know. But I do know you were not just a Chicago boy meeting Mississippi, not just a whistling boy, a kidnapped boy, a brutalized boy, a bloated boy with a ring on his finger, not just a boy in an open casket, not just a buried boy, a gone boy. You were a boy with a favorite dessert, a favorite place to play, a favorite joke to tell. You were a boy with a favorite song—a song that you couldn't stop listening to, couldn't stop singing it in your head, over and over. What was the song? Had you kept living, maybe you would sing us that song, teaching us the original version. By now the song would be remixed, new verses added, but still the same.

EMMETT TILL PROJECT

And the record keeps spinning, scratched and stuck
on the chorus. So many verses etched in the vinyl.
So many unfinished songs.

Your name, the refrain: Emmett Till. Medgar Evers,
Martin Luther King, Jr., Henry Dumas, Fred
Hampton, Mulugeta Seraw, Amadou Diallo, Sean
Bell, Aiyana Jones, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin,
Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, Eric
Garner, Michelle Cusseaux, Akai Gurley, Tanisha
Anderson, Tamir Rice, Tanisha Fonville, Ezell Ford,
Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton
Sterling, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Botham
Jean, Aura Rosser, Atatiana Jefferson, Ahmaud
Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard
Brooks

and this is to say, since you were taken away from
us, so much has changed and everything is the
same. But always, your name is spoken. Like a holy
chant, a rally cry, a prayer. We cannot, will not forget
you. You are the song stuck in our hearts. And the
record keeps spinning, spinning.

RENÉE WATSON is a New York Times bestselling author, educator, and activist. Her young adult novel, *Piecing Me Together* (Bloomsbury, 2017) received a Coretta Scott King Award and Newbery Honor. Her poetry and fiction often centers around the experiences of black girls and women, and explores themes of home, identity, and the intersections of race, class, and gender. Renée served as Founder and Executive Director of I, Too, Arts Collective, a nonprofit committed to nurturing underrepresented voices in the creative arts, from 2016-2019.

Renée grew up in Portland, Oregon, and splits her time between Portland and New York City.

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