

Wednesday of Holy Week, April 5, 2023

Recommended readings: p. 324, “August 28, 1955” and p. 325-326, “1955”

Danez Smith’s poem “1955” contrasts the sound of the name of Emmett Till with the horrifying images of his body lying in an open casket after his brutal murder:

“...what a soft name, you must hum to begin him
mama’s massacred little man made maybe martyr, mural
haunting wallets, a warning tucked between nephews
his face. no face. that face. his. his name wounds time
his face a knife sinking thru centuries, but centuries don’t fit
in a year or in a boy’s guiltless hands...”

Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals—so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
(Isaiah 52:14-15)

During a visit to Mississippi, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Chicago speaks to a 21-year-old white woman—some claim he flirted with her, touched her, or whistled at her. He is later abducted, tortured, maimed, and murdered, and his body is disposed of in a river. When his corpse is eventually returned to Chicago, his mother insists that, at his funeral, his casket will remain open. Photos of his body are published, focusing international attention upon American racism and barbarity. Between 1883 and 1941 there were 4,467 victims of lynching. Most lynchings ceased by the 1960s, but even in 2021 there were claims that racist lynchings still happen in the United States, being covered up as suicides. In 2022, President Joe Biden signed into law an act identifying lynching as a federal hate crime.

Prayer

God who is present even in suffering and death, give us courage to look upon the suffering of our brothers and sisters and never avert our eyes. Help us to see and to celebrate the beauty in the faces and the names of all of your children. Amen.