

PALLETS

Pallets

Pallets¹

Table of Contents

Pallets	3
Coming Fall	9
Boy	10
Slave Houses	12
Etta, Etta, Etta	13
Heels	16
Talking to Herself	18
Duck Walking	20
Red Dipped Spur	22
Crepe	23
My Seamless February	24
Anatomy	25
Sanctified but Dying	27
Freedom Riders, Parchman, MS, 1961	28
Egg Sandwich	32
The Red Tongued Cat	33
The Shade Tree	34
Feast	35
The Intent	36
Memory of Spit	41
Quail Shot	42
Aristocracy of Suffering	43
Dying Breath	45
Sunday Gloves	47
Beets, Bleeding and Wounded	48
Autumn in My Once Fancy Eyes	49
Crèche	50
Evening Alone	51
Effie's Selma Heifers	52
Love Poem	56

¹ Pallets are temporary bedding of quilts, blankets, covers, and pillows placed on the floor.

Pallets

Pallets

Who sent us running
Like spirituals in search of a mouthy tongue?
We must have looked like
The first slaves to raise the
Flag of freedom,
Exchanging beds for quilt pallets
On floors that dipped like a belly,
A wooden belly, distended,
In our grandmother's house,
Giant as it was in the architecture
Of former sharecroppers now in town.

Vernacular architecture:
The house was not contemporary
But sorely generational and tiny.

We were mannerable
But cleverly poor,
For as the children of
churched, working and
And single good- looking women,
We had the polish of grace and
Industry, and the expectation
Of some education-driven meritocracy.

And we dressed not simply
Appropriately but ambitiously.

Bearing pots, pans, and covers for
Pallets on our weekly or daily
Hegira, crossing HWY 51 South,
Like a blues song waiting to
Be picked up by an itinerant
Evangelist, who could take
The unopened violence of my
Day and ameliorate it through
Shared and public sentiment.

We dodged the art of pedophiles,
And we dodged bloated opossums,

Pallets

Stunned by cars into their early
Sarcophagi of the open air,
Their rib bones grinning at us like
Unnatural and startling visitors.

Though young we knew bones
Should not be outside the flesh
But inside the flesh.

Though young we knew that
The opossum's splayed, sunburned hair was
Not the same as the artificial wig
Of the unstable woman who repented
Each Sunday, though they bore
Similarities.

We avoided the blind side of
Semi-trailer trucks and suspect automobiles,
And country, sorry-assed motorcycles,
Heading to the Rebel cafe as we,
Navigated all vehicles propelled like
Released water in stanchions,
Bent hoses, with the curved streets,
And highways forming a
Cartography of serpents,
A water of cars rolled out
Like hosed Birmingham children.

Some poisonous streets and
Some nonpoisonous, we loved
The serpentine ways and
The reputations of the vagrants,
Disciplined Monday through Friday,
Drunk as hell, heading home Saturday,
And titular deacons on Sunday,
Without the sanction of church, boss
And family, they reorganized
Biblical texts and canon in their
Own religious encyclicals.

The respectable elders watched and reported
On us especially when the baby,
Born impetuous, almost was no more,

Pallets

As we lost Pewee, Bigmama's chihuahua,
Petite, killed but not irreconcilably crushed.

Following us home,
Across the treacherous highways and byways,
Such fatal fidelity deserved final
Rites; so, we presided over the dog's
Funeral with great solemnity,
Greater than the dignity and holiness
That the uninsured got,
And sang anthem Number 143,
In the exaggerated meter of lined
Out hymns in call and response,
To the measured whimpering
Of the baby, which sounded
Eerily dog-like, this
Baby- becoming toddler who wailed
Once like a hired, trained mourner, giving
The occasion the chiming outburst,
Right as the family views the body
For the final time in recessional,
And hollered again as I said ashes to ashes,
And dust to dust with
Picked, front yard azaleas on a Vest Brown shoebox.

And with papal gravity,
We all returned to the porch,
Washed white as gravel after a slushy thunderclap,
Soon to break out in
The second line jazz dance of ice cream,
Grateful that Bigmama was
Too heartbroken for ass-whippings
For sacrificing her dog, raised like
An outside grandchild.

But her cursing us out that day
As she served the cream,
Was awe-inspiring without
Vulgarity and mean-spiritedness
To scar us:

Vehement cursing. Tempestuous
Cursing. Organized cursing. Fluent cursing.
Oratorical cursing. Bombastic cursing. Inventive cursing.

Pallets

That day.

The bipolarity of the ceremony and
The terror of the hurt dog's owner,

She as the god of provision
And the god of decision,
Decidere, to cut off,
She as El Shaddai--God Almighty, the Law Giver,
El Shaddai--the Multi-breasted one, the Provider,
And she as El G'Mulah--the God who surely repays.

Which was more beloved, the child or
The dog, we could not tell
In the acute hour of her
Vituperation and bereavement.

The avowed bibliophile,
I carried books alongside pajamas
And red beans and rice and school
Clothes and sodas as I
Bristled under my evident leadership, for my primogeniture
Made me both husband, elder brother and father,
With the signature of a poet and Mosaic preacher,
On this pilgrimage of bundles.

And made me the beloved among the saints.

It was something holy and unholy,
Affectionate and reckless,
Respite seeking and betraying,
About our traveling, thrust into
Semi autonomy, thrust into
Precocious courage like the watered
Down children of Birmingham.

We anticipated the waxed hearses the color
Of blackberries in the dusk as we lived next
To the youngest cemetery, in a
Home we were not allowed to own,
By a black family whose absentee
Matronly landlord's lizard shoes
Came from SAKS and whose mink,

Pallets

With a lustrous head and nose,
The shape of an inanimate pear,
Was docile on her shoulders, its eyes gleaming like
New, small champagne grapes.

A most sophisticated, stilettoed woman
Who could leave fine shoes
And fine stoles for molestation and perusal.

Our vegetable garden that
Separated the cemetery from
The property line was a buffer,
Between the dead and the living,
So death lost its abhorrence
If not its tears, in
The cavalcade of mourners,
Motored in the cortège, as
We stared through brilliant
Trees with overripe,
Plums, matted on the ground like
Funereal floral arrangements,
Whipped three days by rain.

We watched the anonymous
Dead in shorts and sandals,
For if we had been in suits,
They would have been one of us.

As we traversed the Baertown
Streets among our three mothers--
Bigmama, Ma and Aunt Mel--
I heard all of them cry so many
Times, and my grandmother,
As comedic as she was, was also
The Empress of Weeping, the Star
Of Worry, whose tears, buoyant
As guffaws, swept the house with
Meaning and like billows of infamous smoke,
Her tears' lingering
Would not leave too soon.

Big as hydrangeas, her tears
Fell to the floor as swollen footsteps fall adamantly.

Pallets

Weeping in the bathroom,
Head resting on the commode,
In her humblest estate,
Motherly, glamorous, fulsome weeping,
Then soured as inappropriate, barbaric laughter;

We could not tell the difference until
We saw the tissue tattooing her cheek and
Temples, bald almost with the alopecia of heartbreak.

We knew when we hastened there,
The newspapers as place mats on the kitchen
Floor would be set in her establishment.
We carried our mother's bread,
Burnt as asphalt on the bottom;
We preferred what Bigmama cooked,
Greens and brown-bottomed cornbread that she ate
With her fingers, in the immemorial
Style of African and Eastern elders whose artifacts of tastes,
Asserted themselves, revolted through
The antithesis of slavery.

Now as the clouds began to
Take on the patina of the
Storm, and the sky darkened
Like bruised blood,
And portentous thunder was scarier
Than lightning, and our tears
Announced our immaturity, our
Dependency, despite being brazen
As we play-walked acting like
Marvel- filled grown folks,
We scurried to Bigmama's house,
Where I was prayed over by a sanctified preacher's eloquent wife,
Where I was delivered by a clairvoyant, esteemed midwife,
Whose coiled hair was long as a shirt sleeve,
Where she who had wept often,
Wept tears suborned by the unknowable,
Pardoned her grandchildren's weeping,
And water met water.

Pallets

Coming Fall

The clouds marble the skies,
The way fat wantonly threads fine beef.
Each day the oranging of the leaf,
Saddens into summer demise.

I feel the harshness of my sweat,
As summer fattens into its fall fragrance,
The scent of chill and earthy decadence,
Passing over me with breadths of regret.

Now all the leaves surrender,
Broken stems sweeten the soil,
They and I, fruitless, undisciplined, spoiled,
Fall into former times to remember.

What shall I do between two seasons,
What shall I do with this mood of exile,
That keeps me here yet another time awhile,
Hurting for summer's liaisons, intermissions.

Pallets

Boy

He dipped black shoe polish,
Clumped on his cloth-covered fingers,
The way women dipped lard or Vaseline,

Polish-viscous, coagulated as the insides of blood sausage.

He was meticulous, extravagant about his manicure,
To signify that though he was a shoe-shiner,
His bearing did not countenance polish under the
Nail staining his fingertips with a mechanic's residue.
His shoe stand was arranged with aesthetics,
Without an overbearing, spare utility.

So each evening he soaked his fingers after preparing
His own shoes spit shined to moonlight blue,
His fingertips lustrous and elite.
He made dinner from his day's wage and
The surfeit of a solid budget,
A third of which for his daughter's Physics classes.
A shine so ink-spot black that it straddled blue,
Entrepreneurial blue that made you look
And grunt twice, the way you do a double take
At an ugly baby,
But now the object of your intrusive
Intrigue was a blue- black shine,
That restored broken shoes speckled as cracklings.

Artisanal blue.

He picked his nails like a Christmas-time cake maker
Extracts walnut meat with the fine instrument.

Brought up by women but now
Serving the clientele of men,
He was doubly conversant in the
Significances of shoes, and
The light, unctuous in the black shoe polish,
Fragrant as turpentine.

For he had known how
To make a shoe burn like
Spread out obsidian, malleable as

Pallets

His cloth, a cloth that whistled and talked,
Able as an insouciant man.

Refinement as to the manner born,
A man with two years of college, yet forlorn,
By cotton and tobacco picking with scorn;
These hands made his daughter's braids steer's horns.

The cap toe oxfords as elegant as carnelian cabochons²,
And as precious to the men of meager wages
And derelict benefits, lay down under his pickle
Thick fingers.

Thus, in the democracy
Of his shoe stand that gave every man his
Excellence, he made the workingman patrician,
And the ruling class aware of the toll of
Pedestrian strains indicated in distorted feet and
Discredited leather.

Careful not to soil the two-inch cuff,
He unbraided and relaced the shoestrings
More deftly than he did his daughter's hair
In his novice widowhood.
He feasted in the customs
Of his parental office.

"Boy, You do a hell of a job."
As the timbre of the coin
Danced in the cup, commonly if noisily,
As a White man's gold signet ring,
Against a Black man's tooth.

² Cabochons are rounded, polished gemstones that are not faceted.

Pallets

Slave Houses

All these huts,
Black and bloody as moles,
On my Bigmama 's face,
Houses across the marshlands,
Mole-like forming on the land, an
Archipelago of moles on my Bigmama's face.
Houses, deep melanin
Upon the landscape of the
Southern earth,
And earthen floors,
Houses, lined up near the fields,
My future beyond these fields,
With all these black babies
Toting water until they could
Manage a hoe or tote a
Cotton-picking sack, lopsided and
Bloated like a dead body in the river,
All these black babies with
Blonde and red hair,
Some straight and some nappy,
Hair tight as black pepper corns,
Or threadlike as corn silk,
Their feet traipsing not altogether
Running, a bit in awe, to get a Christmas apple,
Aromatic and the size of a
Fist of rain that Elijah,
The rainmaker, saw,
The smell of invaluable apple,
Signaling the shift like the scent of rain,
From drought to prosperity at
Prophetic Christmastime.
Even in winter, against the
Insufficient hearth, rode in,
The Christmas apple, one from their
White daddy and one from their black daddy,
Both daddies bearing seed,
Of babies caught by the midwife,
Whose heels were bespoke with
Affection for the crisp apple- red of
Their heads, crowning their slave
Mama's redder privates.

Pallets

Etta, Etta, Etta

Her costume jewelry, lined like
Selections of tapas in her
Grandmother's pine chifforobe,
Was collectible, appetizing but finite;
Unproductive for the next generation, the pieces would lay
Inert, their grandiosity,
Laughed at and maligned by those,
Who saw the cataract like tarnish of
Paste to be too
Conspicuously low down despite the
Jeweler's occasional mark.

Ashamed of the jewels as if the
Tin settings were drunkards beneath
Some sobriety of the smart-assed
Beholders, this day.

They did not know that the wearer
Motivated the inherent life of jewelry.

Etta's mother wore the broach on the breast
But she wore it at the breast.

Indeed, where the breasts touched.

Her body was fullish,
The way a look
Can be womanish,
And her eyes can walk her betrothed's back.

Ready for her lobes to welcome
The earrings the way a man penetrates a woman,
These heirlooms bore no stylish merit
And purchasing.

Dropped earrings descending like
Early Louisiana strawberries, ever
Young, bending the stems,
Overburdening the leaf,
Lapping themselves upon the earth,

Pallets

Dirt, black as her ears cupping inward,
Ears rolling as the edge of
A ceramic cup rolls.
Raindrops big as puppies
Muddied her eyeliner.
One had never seen a black river
On black land until one saw the
Critical beauty of this rivulet.

One could not call Etta ugly
Because she was immutably black,
As if blackness were an act of redacted prophecy,
Black with her lips thin and oxblood red as
Sliced beets and her teeth,
Anatomically white as balls of
Played- with light bread.

For though she was young, someone or
Something old had begotten her,
And she came down through
42 generations like Christ,
With the attraction of premature dignity and enigma,
Which could not be totally corrupted by
Her peak-a-boo slip.

And like Him, when severely insulted
She could display the wrath of
Marked scholarship and a mysticism,
From studying the secrets of hypocrites
And the metaphors of those in
The landscape of the periphery.

Unlike the accuser, she demarcated
The secular from the sacred.

Unlike the accuser, she did not
Transubstantiate love for tribulation and sadness.

Unlike the accuser, she knew you
Couldn't have the scent of shit
Unless someone had shat.

Unlike the accuser, she did not

Pallets

Define the sins of the flesh as the
Greatest sins.

Unlike the accuser, she knew that
She could not know the alcoholic,
Without the funk of liquor.

Her redoubtable cleavage
Ate gold overlay and faded coral,
The soft color of blood
Mixed with milk,
With her eyes crowned with false
Eyelashes waving at you like a
Gloved paltry hand in hallelujah shouting.

Fluorescent lashes and soft, demure,
Lyrical teeth.

Though conspicuous,
She once flat ironed her hair,
But found that ritual innately illegitimate.

Thus, she found her manly and
Natural hair a direct form of worship to God
As her nappy curls,
Separate and proximal, thickened
Like piled lentils on a meat skin.

Pallets

Heels

The heels of her feet,
Round and crusty as
The end of bread loaves,
Bound her vast ethics,
Her credentials,
Her attempt to infuse
Fleshiness into the skin,
Proclaiming authentic,
Hard-wrought ambulation.

For if the spiritualist were truly
A seer, she would have read her etiology³,

The longevity of her good fortune,
In the prescience and retrospection of her feet,
Rather than the lines of her hands.

Long as baby coffins,
Her feet--self pedicured, gleaming--
And her toes as pointed as
Feminine, mythological figureheads of ships,

Anchored by cohabiting heels,
That remained inferior as if
Her mama and daddy had exhausted
The best genetic material and
Palette in adventurous and expensive lovemaking,

While making the front
Of the feet, while yet
Fabricating the prenatal heel with leftovers.

She had no one to tell
Her how obese her heels
Were, that they overrun and oppress

Her shoes, nobody to tell

³ Etiology is the study of the origins, causes, and reasons behind phenomena.

Pallets

What the heels' narrative implied.

Nobody to no one.
No mama. No daddy. No
Lover. No bather. No
Attendant. No niece.
No masseuse. No concierge.
No confidant. No aunt.

No prophet to lament the
Dimensions of her reproach,
The preeminent ashiness of her ankle bones.

And like the obsession of
The distinguished and vain
men who pomaded the
Front of their hair,
With a predestined retinue
Of toiletries, only to
Estimate the farthest and
Neglected bottom of the nape,

Her heels like voluptuous lips spoke to the
Approaching and empathetic onlooker.

Pallets

Talking to Herself

Flimsy and thrown in the light,
Her willowy shift singed in flight,
And her hair rallying the improvised pyre,
As her motherly wildness is called by the fire.

Illuminated arms as flares,
Now too quickly, the funeral affairs,
The flame-scalped mother buries her child,
Far too soon and never to stay awhile.

And there, her reduced daughter
Incinerated in the damaged corner,
Where death had been inflicted,
Upon now, the place most visited.

Among the ashen debris,
The woman sounds the maternal threnody,
And the two who were inseparable,
Twain, on each side of the unfathomable,

Where all the fiery, singed detritus,
Has been resodded with bulbous,
Flowers covering the plot's,
History, she still feels besot,

By the early morning quintet,
Of sirens where the fire was set,
Five engines ravenous for water,
Unable to save her daughter.

She hears 20 voices rather than five,
Twenty dry voices when on one she thrived,
Her girl's amplifying soprano,
Harmonious with her alto.

The quintet conflicts with this duet,
And the mother, who is disconsolate,
Rests her fingers on the girl's eyeglasses,

Pallets

Atop the closed casket where the mourner passes.

Only to count what she sees?
She, in the dire knowing of the unseen,
Believed that her contrition,
Would dissolve this omission:

For she had left her alone,
Thinking that her being so close to grown,
Determined her girl would be alright,
This day, the child saw morning but no night.

For no mother who has lost a child
Calculates only feet as she trods the guilty mile,
But considers the circumstances
Of those breached entrances,

When by the doorway, life-absent shoes,
Urge the violent, covetous muse,
To inspire conversation between
Her and her memory of the scene.

Pallets

Duck Walking

She walks like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer walked,
Kind of afflicted, hippety-hoppity , but Bigmama got her limp
Without the beating the heroine took, limp-licked.
Bigmama walks like a chair dragged across the floor,
The noise her hipbones make if you could hear them.
The phone rings as a bell in her seared hip,
Pungent salves arranged haphazardly,
Next to half tightened perfume bottles,
Their tops rising like finials of vanity,
To rebuke her arthritic hands.

“Lord, have mercy on me,” she says to Ryan’s doll-black eyes,
Humanitarian and animalistic in their reflection,
In their sensitivity. The Pomeranian’s hair slick as her daddy’s.

All the way to the voting precinct, walking slew-footedly when
She used to walk straight, her footprints parallel as the yellow lines
Of Highway 51. Two orthopedic shoe prints,
And the polka dot of a walking stick,
Shoes as amorphous and unattractive as bundled socks.

Her jeans fashionable but high water above the ankle socks.
Now, that pain travels down the highways of her joints, all the
Way down lassoing her inner thigh;
Only she knows the song her hipbones sing.
A tight pomegranate of pain blooming,
Where her bones rub together.
I know her tears slick Ryan’s hair. But I know...

The hurt talks to her and she talks to it.
She calls for death but death does not call for her.
She will live longer even as she appears unvictorious,
Compromised and moribund, ill served by well doctors.
The degenerative disease surgeon is going to cut open that
Song and give her a new song, she hopes, mindful of
The powerful anesthesia, both a healer and an undertaker.

Following up Ryan’s barking to signal a visitor at the front door,
She carries her hurting leg like a toothache carries throbbing,
Holding on to the leg just like a bride cups her pristine train, and
On her final Sabbath, virginal and disrobed, she will not duck walk,

Pallets

Supine, this time, the body readied and immaculate for the bridegroom.

Who then is this bridegroom adoring the limp-legged woman?

Who is this king raising the beckoning standard as he enters
The clinging gates of her body?

Rise, O Rise, Barren Limp-Legged One!!!

Bigmama's hair is mannish tapered to the neck,
And her lips are womanish ensorcelled with lipstick,
Her face powdered with the nutmeg of mascara,
Her face looking like her mother wrapped in a head rag,
And her eyes photographing her multiple intelligences,
And her baseball cap, sequined as gold teeth,
In a rich woman's mouth,
Sparkling against the great Sunday chalice,
Of Holy Communion.

On Sunday, she duck walks to church.

On Monday, she duck walks to get her newspaper,
The rural local McComb Enterprise Journal.

On Tuesday, she duck walks to the door to let
The subsidized cleaning lady in to do light mopping.

On Wednesday, she duck walks to let her grandson in.

On Thursday, she duck walks to the rocking chair to
Watch the news and the gospel station.

On Friday, she duck walks to the counter to
Use her good arm to shampoo her hair,
Hair washed one handedly with the same
Fingers that lifted heavy assed cast iron skillets to fry oyster po-boys.

On Saturdays, she duck walks to the door to call, "Blackie, Blackie"
Her overweight cat fed with grits, spaghetti,
Chicken bones, greens and dollar store bought dog food.

Again, on Sunday, she duck walks to hush Ryan, her child like Pomeranian,
Whose hair is as black and coiffed and straight as her White-Indian

Looking daddy's, and she calls her dog,

"Ryan, Ryan," pronounced like watermelon "Rind, Rind."

Pallets

Red Dipped Spur

Lighting of red,
From a black leg, taut as hickory.
Oxidized scarlet of the threadbare veins,
But one is obvious, succulent.
The rooster nails it;
Spilling blood like an unfurling tongue,
Blood intemperate.
Nail through a foot,
Like the wood of the cross,
Dripping an ornamental, ringing red.
Its red dipped beak of a spur
Paints no more grass,
Tipped with this free flowing crimson,
As the rooster empties its final urine,
Next to kernels of bronze corn.
Almost bled to death,
Hospitalized for a week,
She who gives jellies and sells heifers,
Had her son-in-law to blow
The rooster's brains out;
Innards gelatinous as jam,
Robust chicken breast now stiff as rhubarb,
And breast white as sliced pound cake.
Now like a self-contained pinecone,
With feathers similarly arranged,
Thrown over the fence,
The rooster, limped neck with spur intact,
Triangular and black as Ms. Tot,
Rattles briefly against the pine
Fence post that she placed,
Next to the post-hole digger,
Its blades, a poised open mouth,
The post-hole digger,
Next to the soil open and irregular,
As an ulcer where the
Bird, as an edge of a plow's blade, struck her.

Pallets

Crepe

103 years old: Her hand unfolds like a piece of *Crepe de Chine*,
Which adorns her hat from the Brass Hanger.
Biscuit, Blackburn syrup, chicken livers.
She eats what she likes because
She cannot cook what she loves,
And she cannot cook where she lives.
And she was a cook not just for the white folks,
But for herself, also, until inflammation made a chain link
Around her wrists, and then she, forbidden, accepted
The insufferable styrofoam dinner plates,
It was a shot that kept killing,
For a real cook detests laziness fed to people.
Eating other people's cooking, an anachronism
Like bottled water, something not in her time.
Each fried chicken liver lifted,
Heavier than the hand that lifts.
Well water. Hydrant water. Ice water.
Colored-only fountain water. Faucet water.
Cocoa butter keeps her skin from rustling
In a subtle whistling against the coffee cup,
Dripping black coffee in the saucer to be cooled by
Breaths invisible as the coffee steam is visible;
So many contradictions of substance and non-substance,
This grand woman and her fragility, like blown coffee
Vapor bearing the essence of darkness but not the color of it,
Bearing the aroma of coffee but not the grinds,
She is ephemeral now. She is insubstantial now.
"I didn't cook this myself; You remember
I would fix you and Little Willie a plate of biscuits?" she says.
The piece of chicken liver
Hanging from her undecorated finger tips,
Like a teardrop pendant hangs from a necklace,
Chicken livers pendulant and dark as uncircumcised keloids.
Beneath her fingernails, grit and lint,
And the vinegar of rejected, ill-seasoned breading.
Biscuit wiped syrup, recreational eating, no sense of repast, no glee,
Syrup swirled through with her finger, to reveal the white
Plate like the bluntest knife cutting through
Her own flesh's white meat to the bone.

Pallets

My Seamless February 7

Leaves wrestle in their terrible, seamless calligraphy;
Unmolested, they conceive chaos along the lines
Of winds, cinematic in their dance and acutely
Determining. The leaves cannot entertain themselves.
They are driven today; They are foretelling today.

February, one of the warmest months of our winter,
Refuses to know that it should bear snow not tornadoes,
As gardens drop cherry tomatoes,
Some edible and others acidic domiciles,
To ants and defiled beetles,
Bustling at the back of his work boots,
His heels shaped like a cul-de-sac,
Ants and beetles,
Bustling at his heels,
As they will bustle at his bones.

Toward an epicenter of this disquiet,
Toward the middle of wet arabesques,
Only with the cars sloshing,
Only with the night-time struck buck laying,
Only with the juice of his orange running,
Piles and piles of carted wood,
Build and build into a multitude,
Upon the wood seller's car,
His wood begins to roll like needles upon the dresser,
His orange peels from lunch dangling like
Ringlets of perceptible wind.

Wet, wet in the luke-warm rain,
His upholstered cab accepts him as he runs;
His wood as black as he, the pulpwood hauler
Blackened by the litany of the deluge;
He leaves two pieces of wood where they lay;
The coffee filter, leftover in sink, he recalls;
He respects the path that the winds' width,
Has shorn through the personally cut fields;
Nothing is left there, where his Chevrolet
Rested but wood shavings, peels,
And beetle dung peppering the peels' pith.

Pallets

Anatomy

Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me

I am my mother's legs and butt;
I am my father's torso, top heavy with belly and breasts;
 I imagine him, the one I do not know;
I am my sister, brothers and little uncle's throats, waiting
 for cornbread and red beans and rice to cross the threshold of teeth;
I am my grandmother's arthritis and disposition for diabetes and heart disease;
I am the lips of my great uncle, who was handsome, even in
 his decrepitude, unmistakably beautiful;
I am my grandfather's namesake; I feature him;
I am my great grandfather's height if not his light skinned color;
I am my ancestors' Afro-European hair,
 enhanced with applications and vigorous brushing;
I am my mentor's big ears gotten from his Jewish grandfather;
I am my fiancée's liquid seeking to name the unnamed child;
I am my unborn children's expression;
I am my great great aunt's feet, long as baby coffins.

Do not hold me hold me hold me hold me hold me hold me.

I got the biochemistry from all sides;
I got the religiosity from all sides;
I got the amorous touch from all sides;
I got my femininity from all the women;
I got my masculinity from all the women.
I got my intelligence from all sides;
I got my necromancy from all sides;
I got my psychological mystery from all sides;
I got my justice from the open and clandestine resistance;
I got my love of color and cloth from my mother;
I got my regality from their perseverance;
I got my love of what clothes can do from my uncles,
 Cuff linked dapperness in fields of austere cotton.

Pray for me For me For me For me For me

I got my musicality from borrowed lungs like Christ borrowed the tomb;
I got my love of old people from my great grandmother;
I got my entrepreneurship from my grandmother;
I got my compulsive spending from my mother;
I got my love of the church from all sides;

Pallets

I got my love of children from all sides;
I got my sensuality and sainthood from black preachers;
I got the blues from all sides;
I got the shovel in my hands from the undertaker.

Fan me Fan me Fan me Fan me Fan me

I am blood memory. I am her face without my mother's nose.

I am blood memory.

I am a pillowcase ready to put the pillow in.
I am the shovel full of manure and soil
Ready to be hauled off in burlap bags.

I am my own obituaries and the continuum of obituaries.
I am what the soloists that my lovers tell God about.
They will shout for me in their dignified veils and hats.

Now when it has come time to take the pillow of my
Body and wrap it up for the final time,
In the pillowcase of blood memory,
Imagine my rising from our bed, and then
I want all of the women who helped me then, to

Help Me Help Me Help Me Help Me Help Me.

Sanctified but Dying

My love poem is not for the sanctified
Those separated from the neurosis of nakedness
I have felt this convulsive lust,
Since I first unimagined you; for no dreamer
Could carve your silhouette—half flesh, half divinity,
Out of something as incorporeal as a dream,
Out of something as illustrious and intangible as dream-life.
Though dreams embody life like imagery,
They do not fulfill my wakened world, so emaciated,
So paradisiacal without the possibility of this depravity.
Each day, I see you move through our home,
Your overweight body, the flashlight of some
Gospel of chaos, shining specifically on me.
For I, forever in darkness, as a midnight doe,
Struck first by the car light, that scurries me into or
Out of this chaos, for I know still it is light, tinged by blood,
And light has become my crypt,
And my life has become still more tumescent.
Who lives well in a bloodless marriage?
So, who can tell me this: that life and death
Are different; they are more than twins; they are
Indecipherable when I am in your arms,
Incorruptible when I am in your hair,
When I am between the same breasts through which you
Excavate my impurities while naming my purities.
Now, your body pervades my presence like
A paring knife wounds the skinning of lemon;
You know my pith, the skin before the skin,
The absent foreskin, you know it too,
My preadolescence, you have mined my former selves,
The bitter whiteness before the juicy witness,
The source of my religion and my persecution.
Like a tennis bracelet of knives against my wrist,
Your nipple alerts my intimate pulse;
And your thickness as only I have seen in a black woman,
Will be my romancer, the way the death angel, hallucinogenic,
Seduces the dying with crazy assed smells,
Seduces the dying with crazy assed thoughts,
On the waning side of lucidity,
In which the ancestors are as redolent as
Your odor in our emergency, current lovemaking.

Pallets

Freedom Riders, Parchman, MS, 1961

Flavored still by his intimacy with cow manure,
Black pepper sized flecks of blood,
Grumbling racket and breath emitted by the heifer's cud,
In the Greyhound bus station, tickets procured.
He had seen livestock mill around, sensing slaughter,
Now men in suits and women in skirts electing slaughter,
Whatever the rationale beyond being a citizen,
Now, not in the first wave, but the second,
He was in their pin, in their pin.
Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Straight to the Whites's Only,
He had left instructions for the will and the eulogizing homily.
His daddy had been an NAACP organizer,
And his maternal grandfather had raised the first black high school,
A principal when they were demi-gods,
Penurious salaries, cardboard in his shone shoes, no muddy clods.
Both of these male progenitors became famous for
Staying still and avoiding lynching, when
Others in the multitude of terror, are fallen,
Or left fleeing on the back of the train hauling,
Ass. Crestfallen, crestfallen, crestfallen...

Alfred de Lavallade McDougal, IV, a.k.a, Youngboy.
Youngboy's work at the Parchman Farm--
The State Penitentiary of Mississippi--
*His family's maid called Parchman the "pinitancture" when
She heard he was in the prison sanitorium that she called the "horsepillow"⁴--*
Was not too different from the McDougal Place, but his daddy and
His daddy's daddy's daddy owned their own place;
Curly-haired and olive-skinned like Frederick Douglass,
The McDougal men tended to be small-framed and
Regal like *By the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah*
His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God.

The light-skinned McDougal women descended from French,
Spanish, mythological, aristocratic Malagasy of Madagascar,
And a blood drop of African --the *Gens De Couleur Libre*⁵,
Legitimized by *plaçage*⁶, affianced forever,

⁴ Hospital pronounced horsepillow.

⁵ Free Persons of Color

Pallets

In the curse of chattel as the white women,
In the sacrament of marriage,
Wedded to these Afro-Creoles' lovers,
Bore the curse of the pedestal; the de Levallades blended into
Mississippi mulatto families in self-contained enclaves and
Like European royalty married only among themselves for
The McDougals and de Lavallades, daughters of magnificent *placées*,
Were distant cousins, with some interposition of the
Irish, English and Scottish fathered children from,
Various plantations, assignations and love bonds; they were
Only good for each other's affections and other intermixed bloodlines.

Infamously, a downtown mob attacked his granddaddy who was visibly Colored
For holding the arm of his grandmother who was not visibly Colored,
And she, presumed to be white, with her parasol,
Pummeled their brows and forearms, and
Till the day her tongue locked to the roof of her mouth,
Stilled after the death rattle, she kept a portrait of her husband,
Brown and sepia-skinned, whom she considered
The most unimaginably handsome man,
A photograph of her man absolute and loved, standing out,
Among her white-looking sisters and brothers who could have passed,
A most repugnant thought to these green and blue-eyed,
Folks who passed into the race and not out.

Some of Youngboy's friends, his fellow riders had come from the city,
And only visited exotic farmland of their extended family,
But he had come from landowners and educators,
Thus, this irregularity of working for someone else,
This smelling of someone else's cow shit,
(For he had been assigned on the penal farm to animal husbandry,
Even though he tasted no beef during this infelicity
Of breaching the peace, the cells ringing with freedom songs,
Of which his Creole mother might not have approved, for she had
Gone first to Xavier University, but was graduated from Spelman College,
Where her aunt, an aristocratic dorm matron, basically
Begged the president to accept her as a midterm freshman.)

These ungrammatical and unlearned white men,
Whose vulgarity reminded him of his Amite County white kin,

⁶ *Plaçage* was a 19th century legitimate status of an extramarital relationship between a French or Spanish man and a Creole woman. Practiced primarily in New Orleans, it gave these women, known as *placées*, and children certain benefits, rights and recognitions.

Pallets

Separated not just by race but by a property fence,
By the bravura of his confidence,
Actually, were the joy of his nonviolence,
Even in the firecracker of sparkle colored blood,
From a policing trustee's club,
But he could not bear the violence of this unnatural work,
So, he had to adjust not to labor,
But to the absconded status of the laborer.

Sandwiched between mob violence and work violence,
He felt like the bologna they fed him since,
Arriving, he, who had never eaten processed meat,
Familiar with beef, pork, goats and even sheep,
He had seen his father filet veal, slaughter hogs
Was now in a pig pin, in the abattoir,
And Parchman left him scarred,
That 50 years later, he rejected the reunion invitation,
For no fellowship with old Freedom Riders and a new state,
Could bridge that wound as a healed scion.

He had been a boy farmer, relishing his daddy,
Muscular from plowing and manipulating compost,
Literate in oratory, chemistry and agronomy;
His daddy had served in World War II, walking from Jackson
To Alcorn A and M College in Lorman;
Had gotten a master's in agricultural economics
From Cornell University and was encouraged to teach,
But calculating the salary of a Negro professor in Mississippi,
But calculating the love he did not have for the city,
(For he had been offered a minor post in the federal government)
And capitulating to the land itself, which across the street
From the family church, the bull and heifers peeped through
The ornate gate of his family's cemetery;
The prestigious, paltry salary versus
The harvests of 800 acres of ancestral land,
He had a poet's mind but not a poet's hands.

So, his daddy was a farmer who could write agricultural manuals,
And when he was refused the purchase of tractor even with cash,
He, his boys and his work hands clutched still the plow handles,
And he forgave the discriminating storeowner,
Whose forehead that week was marked with holy ash.
He bought his tractors and equipment elsewhere,
Even as the local merchants conspired.

Pallets

But loving his mother, whose eyes belied his ovations,
With a maternal wildness, reserved, but telling of violence
That Youngboy might not return to her upright.

For she had seen these boys from Vietnam,
And she had played the organ for some traumatized at
Home, marching to the sing-song cadence of a drum,
Of a freedom song during mourning occasions,
With so many black men remediated by death, her breast ached
For the suckling of a son, his eyes to meet hers,
Holding his baby head in the crook of her neck,
A son whose transcendence,
Built a wedge between her and her literary society sisters' salons,
Now, he, with an English collar—looking dignified almost clerical,
Stood between the stench of dung paddies,
And the welcoming paddy wagons.

Pallets

Egg Sandwich

I cannot eat this indelicate yolk
Of the egg, a yolk once so
Rural and rich, it bordered
On the brown of aged honey.
I hold this egg this time in my hand,
And it is heavier than its own
Matrilineal hen.

It is the egg of
My grandmother's lips,
Formed and re-formed by
The coyness of death,
The finesse of lipstick,
The layers of the funeral spray, and,
The prison of embalming fluid.
An egg-shaped word that
No woman can speak to me again.

But this egg is empty on the inside,
Without the laughter of Larry,
Who at 1:00am in the morning
The screen door knocked against
The door seal, waking,
His Aunt Melvin, protesting,
Made the egg sandwich with
Mayonnaise and tomato, white bread,
And then he lay drunk until the
Yolk of the sun rose, running
Upon the horizon, like a cracked
Egg on a thin-bottomed skillet.

Until the yolk of the sun rose,
Spilling its watery eyes upon
The curtains' discovered dusty rim,
Until the yolk of the sun rose,
Anointing Larry's skinny-assed head,
With the oil of morning.
Although I cannot see the now
Immense and flavorless egg,
I taste it whole, seasoned with the
Salt of affliction and black pepper of grief.

Pallets

The Red Tongue of the Cat

Yesterday, the blues came
To me as a red sun,
Melting the world.

The sun cat walking the world,
Its claws burning the flesh of
The Delta world in a nimble and sovereign dance,

On the back of the world, on the backs of black people.
Its rays straight and feline,
Touching me, cat hair to human hair.

The rays of the sun walking
The manhood and womanhood of
The world like a cat walks the back
Of a forlorn, familiar sofa,
Sensing death as it roams the
Backs of the black people.

And that malleable tongue
of the world, loosened by
Heat, laps up life the
Way a kitten drinks milk,

And around this milk bowl
Of sipped up life,
Babies, looking for mummies'
Milk fought against that cat-like
Tongue for the clabbered milk of ages,

A tongue ascending and descending
Into the blood of life, into our
Sovereign selves,
And the babies fought everything
And everyone for their lives,
And they, the renouncers of violence of
The universal sun, filled themselves
With this fought for milk, and,
Belched colicky blues,
That cracked joy,
And their blues smelled of breast milk.

Pallets

The Shade Tree

The bargain under the shade tree,
I reckoned with talent upon lichen green logs,
An uncompromising plea,
Poetry even from the bleeding hogs.

They hung from the hook and post,
As able men boiled cracklings,
Butchered guts, offal, ribs and the pink roast,
On ice for temporary packing.

Their pick up trucks,
Laden with awful, fresh meat,
And the live pigs in the muck,
Red robins, resting with wiry feet,

Like black print on newspaper,
That covered the truck beds,
Running with new blood and the rust of labor,
These trucks, canopied with plywood sheds.

The bird heads haloed in the warm vapors,
Of the cut pork,
Wrapped, tied, for sage sausage later,
Buttermilk biscuits after transport.

The red-breasted robin heads, the shape of gear shifts,
As the men drove away,
Both birds and hogs singing their shrill gifts,
One song of flight, the other of grown men's prey.

Pallets

Feast

His back, the striated bark of
Brisket, flesh healed and re-peeled,
Black as smoke polished by dripping fat,
Her fatter eyes, dumplings upon a floury board,
Grass sprayed with hot sauce like
Blood on the fins of fried fish,
Her skin translucent as the paper
Of white onions,
The whip breaks raw eggs beneath,

His sinew, egg shell like bone
Needles the internal organs,
Blood and water flow as wine and

Thin vinegar and oil, poured upon bread,
His forehead scalped by blunt
Force, great hog head of splintered

And massaged head cheese,
Her toes, orange as apricots,
Dyed by clay as she runs to him,
And her toenails fragile as crackers,
Track his wails for her like a coon
Dog to scent,
And he who has become the feast of His master ,

Recognizes her aluminum skin, sheened by the self same sun,
She appears as a goddess at the
Feast of Shushan,
She, a ghost with teeth, she seems,
Her body in the flight of tears,
Wrapped around her head,
Her dead man in a sheep casing,
Like sausage, his final eyes , encased
Too in their love without language,
The winding sheet as lamb casing,

An indigestible love, fruit of his fruit,
A few hymns and an alien blanket,
For this unencompassed soul,
Lowered into the bread of the earth,
Never to taste death again.

Pallets

The Intent

He was so magnificent, so smashing,
That he wore his black patch above his left eye,
The way a dandy wears a cocked hat,
Akimbo, studied posturing despite the mutilation.

Intentionally leaning patch above a leaning eye.

It was odd this day that he would be in the shop,
For he had graduated from stylist to owner, which
Gave him clear privileges of esteem and laziness, except on
Payday when the men who rented the chairs paid him.

And she was aware of payday and as a mathematical
Mind, she calculated both risk and return,
Both the possibility of transgression and transcendence.

But he had heard of her circuit of fruit,
Like she was an apostle of the gospel of peaches,
Since her recent bloody circumstances.

He did not wear his eye patch on
His eye, but he deftly guided it there,
As she walked through the barber shop door,
Like a tongue parting both teeth and lips.

She approached: a Sabbath ensued, a rest inflamed.
Sabbaticalizing him. The most restless of men,
Even as he had cut the hair in the most
Accurate manner, his worried, incessant conversation
And his breath too tart to be peaceful,
Belied his mature and exact hand.

In his mind, his wound was exaggerated,
But the reality was it was a visible wound
Made beautiful and tasteful with cosmetic surgery and
His superior taste in the attitude of seduction.

“Which math classes are you taking?”
He would ask his boy clients in the chair.
Inquisitive mind and apparent masculinity.

Pallets

Grimacing if they were not in the college
Preparatory classes and if their grammar were
Too remedial and enunciation unintelligible.
“Tell your mama or daddy to bring you by the
Shop from 6-8p.m., Monday-Wednesday, and I
Will help you in your Trigonometry. Don’t forget.”

The hemline of her long floral
And animal print maxi-dress, halter-top style,
Mopped the floor, scooping a colony of hairballs
And lifting an entourage of eyeballs;

Her hemline, kissing the buckle of her statuesque sandals,
Her hemline, flirting with her toes the way water nibbles
At the banks of a muddy brook, her hemline, caressed at the
Raised three inch heels, left a swathe,
The way a finger of bread
Runs through a plate of tomato sauce,
Revealing both the earthen ware beneath,
And the sauce’s richness rouging the fingertips, slightly
Tomatoed in an accidental French nail crescent of red
And green from Italian parsley.

They had known each other in the gifted classes,
But her body had changed since the pregnancy and before
The divorce, and his eye had changed into a lone petal,
A thin, omnipresent piece of flesh that covered his eye,
An overcompensation rather than a normal recess.

She had tutored him, and
He was overwhelmed that her
Body had not reverted to its prepubescent
And svelte armature of bones, which she
Had kept way until her grown years, until
The baby came. She enlarged herself.
And her body stayed as full as a rich woman
Who had plenty to eat.

He was smarter than she was,
But she was coolly intelligent,
Soundly disciplined and thus
She excelled, and the night the
Accident tore his eyeball out,

Pallets

Now covered with flesh,
She was there, attending to the inner
Man now that tragedy had catapulted
From boyhood into opioid addiction and recovery.
He once knocked on her sick grandmother's
Door to beg for pills, but as he
Saw her approach the door, he felt immoral
Like a dog stealing a squirrel's pecans, and fled.

And the night she was hospitalized,
After being broken by her husband,
The ambulance of his heart, not dimmed
By the street life, hastened to her,
And even quicker to her husband, whom if she had not
Begged the soon to be barber shop owner,
Implored him from the sickroom,
He would have been killed him, throat sliced from ear
To ear like a catfish gut by a barber student's
Savage, deft and immaculate razor.
For no one, not even God,
Should lay a hand on this woman, who
As a girl, called his eyelashes too pretty for a boy,
And labored with him through Shakespeare, Gilgamesh,
Wheatley, the Gospel according to Dr. Luke, the Bhagavad Gita,
Dickinson, and the Americanisms of the Marquis de Lafayette,
For him, she could be exegetical, linguistic and mathematical.
And who as a woman like Job had endured,
Too much for the righteous,
And unlike Job had not been restored manifold.

Now the lash and the eye are gone,
Replaced by a scythe of flesh,
An irrational, unrefined circumcision
By windshield wiper shrapnel.

Back then during tutorial time, it was not romantic love,
It was more missionary love: she saw
The sound of the man before she saw
Sign of the man; the sound signified.

But this lugubrious day, pineapple and grape juice
Loosening the skins of their syrupy fruit,
Having not seen him since
She attended his graduation from the GED program,

Pallets

After he dropped out of high school, an honor student,
Too infirm to face the routines of matriculation.

To recover her equilibrium and to have some
Short money, to learn to transact money without
Penalty, as he had been defamed to do in her punitive
Marital bed, she sold \$3 bags of fruit, with the pineapple
Juice, looking like thinned, golden whiskey,
Settled in the bottom of the cellophane bags.

Who sold fruit in a dress like that?
Who brought with them no one but ensured a retinue?

Frankly, although she was beautiful,
Her daughter, Ariel, about three years old,
Was so stunning and so witty,
That the men in the barber shop immediately adopted her,
Creating her an alcove of both picture and word books,
Making sure that their daughters and sons played with her,
When they baby sat as the high definition
TV and the books supervised them,
For such a fruit seller's precocious child with
An elaborate vocabulary, needed more than
Imaginary reading and visualization, as
She blessed other children, more stupid than she.

And she asked the one eyed man,
Looking at her mama arduously through
His one good eye, non-patched, at times:
"Who are you to me and my mommy, looking at us like that?
What's wrong with your eye anyway?"

In his shop, the other barbers, one roaring,
And bent over like a chicken wing,
In the same felt-like dust of hair he had clipped,
Bent over in the same hairballs that her hemline had swept,
Asked his client to forgive him as he yelped,
Even as the customer glanced out the window at a
Passerby wearing some Daisy Dukes cutting her
At the elbow of her ass.

Evident to a child and common in the
Barbershop palaver among men,
No eye could suppress his yearning

Pallets

Of intimacy and convalescence of immeasurable hurt.

He had to have permission to heal,
And access to the art of the healer,
Even if he had to chance her artifice, too.

With the signature eye patch now over his eye,
And his paying \$50, \$10 per bag for five bags of \$3 fruit,
His petty cash for gas money now gone
Gone, gone, gone, gone on this anomaly of days,
She felt sorry for this hard man's easiness, his
Swift bankruptcy, this profitability she executed, with
The scent and juice remaining yet
In her cardboard tray, he slipped her his number
Written in an intelligent script on creased and
Ancient paper, as the rhinestones of her
Electrifying nails, scratched ever so responsively his
Thumb, in the mere foretaste of healing,
In the irritation that comes with a piece
Of loose hair under the tongue and eyelid,
When the exchange of a \$50 bill is transformative
And not translatable, transactional,
In the jargon of her profession,
The spat upon clay of her sweet reticence,
Applied to and was set upon his eye,
Applied to and was set upon him.

Pallets

Memory of Spit

Her earrings were as big as
As a new born baby's head and round as
The lid of a Mason jar,
Of preserved figs with lemon,
Sugar and sticks of cinnamon.

Her lips manifested themselves.

She passed through the bookstore,
Elliptical in her walk, only
The indirect back, the voice reduced,
The remnant of her style and
The gesture as essence and cosmopolitanism.

The stride on the thin commercial carpet,
Her feet smooth as washed mustard
Greens across the back of my hands,
Grains of water and grit,
Washed pulse.

The curve of her mobility,
Conformed into this memory of spit:
All I remember now is
My saliva banked up like
A wad of stinging tobacco with no
Where to spit it, no deposit for its
Aim as she stole my eyesight.

Pallets

Quail Shot

When lovers fail,
And their language dissolves,
From dove to shot quail,
New blood drops to resolve.

Do not their shattering celebrate,
Their agony, their mutual contempt,
We as predators of their loss extenuate,
As voyeurs of their pain, yet not exempt.

As their thunder fries like bacon,
Popping on the skintight pan of heaven,
Blistering, choked words unspoken,
In their rumbling throats--no rise, no leaven.

Then, you have known this stingy death,
You, stripped like licked candy from its stick,
You too have been besodden, beset,
Not by the flow, but by the acrid crick.

Pallets

The Aristocracy of Suffering

For Toni Morrison

To break a tear,
To make it brittle,
To bind puss,
That which is raw and fluid
With bandages.

To coax out the needle of glass,
From my soul, sewn and stitched,
And then manipulate states of
My being, from the temporal to immortal,
From the offense of excrement,
She dabbles in elasticity, fracturing smells.
Now we live in her perfumery.

Her invisible angels have big
Feet of washerwomen and farmwomen,
Between whose toes flowers
Rebound. What fertilizer from
These quasi-celestial beings! Who can
Be so present, so absent from
The body as they mother urbane
Witnesses far-flung from their homestead,
Witnesses now teaching rather than hoeing.

Yes, affected by the arrogant sun, which
Has broken powerfully the watermelon,
Open in the field,
I too burst, I too reveal; I field-opened;
I too have loved and heat
Has disemboweled me.

To animate the shadows
With flesh is to sing
Away death, to restore to
A shadowful mind, some modicum
Of rest, because now it lives.

O but I know of a robber
Of thinness, whose love once

Pallets

As a girl struck me like
A woman hits the piano keys and tambourines,
And now the struck strikes,
And the redeemed redeems.
She as a novelist is a high queen,
My peer as I stand upright as
She writes to the king in me,
And a mutual Aristocracy of
Suffering, in an ancient green
Lattice-like vein of hope, bleeds
Green, green thoughts of freedom.

For in her words I have
Found both my winding sheet
And my unraveling.

But this time, fat not
With her imagery, but with the
Ancestry of her imagery,
Fat with the preordination of imagery,
The primordial rituals, the ageless semiotics of love,
I am no longer revealed in my inelegance,
I am no longer opened with
My insides hanging like hog guts,
For dogs and maggot-bearing flies
To warm at the steam
Of my death, my blood, my vulnerability.

I am no longer the long saliva of
Tears tinkling from the necromancer's novella,
Tinkling from my lover's embattled taste for me,
Which had renamed me so many times.
I am no longer haunted
By what I know and have known
Before I was conceived.

The gravedigger will not be
Paid today because of my fallen
Skin and mildly red bones.
No tips today for the hardworking
Gravedigger, poor as he is, as
Heroic as he is. Let him work
Elsewhere for my time is not at
Hand; for the novelist like God

Pallets

Has rewritten my end.
What audacity to make me
Scripture itself and not
The mere reader of scripture!

Today, no longer brackish,
From the film of those loving but enslaved,
Whose love leaves me both
Holy and stained, bereaved,
I am immodestly beautiful
And I am cleanly noble.

Pallets

*"...my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn
as long as I breathe, I will sob for him
like a woman who has lost her only child."
Gilgamesh, Book VIII, Stephen Mitchell*

*"If my grief is violent enough,
Maybe he will come back to life again."
Gilgamesh, Book X, Mitchell*

Dying Breath

Tears like spit and snot from the lips, nostrils and eyes
Of a team of oxen hit with a backhoe
Came across my face. Whose snotty tears are these?
And then the fine mother of Emmett Till,
The only begotten son,
Dowsed me with even more of her tears,
Even though she dignified them later on
With the lifelong mercies after mercies.
Viewing the boy's body, overwrought women
Waving handkerchiefs the size of dishrags; Mute
Viewing congregations and throngs were merciful, too,
As I called for war with blood running thickly as pancake
Batter in the streets. Emmett looked like he could've
Eaten many o' pancake and pan of Money, MS -baked biscuits.
But what I am supposed to do with a white
Woman's lies as spit from this jolly boy's
Mouth spatters his torture shed,
With the droplets of aspirated and misty
Blood? What am I supposed to do with
Two big white men's confessions?
What am I supposed to do with his
Cries of "Mama, Mama!" and "Lord, Have mercy
on me." I tell you what I *will* do with this
Outrageous grief that does not lie: I *will* sit down,
And rock Emmett in his dying breath.

Pallets

Sunday Gloves

Her hand, sheathed and distorted in a temporary white glove,
Formed by self-rising flour as she salted and peppered,
The legs and wings dipped in hot grease on the stove,
The wrung-necked bird--celebrated and defeathered.

Her work apron matted with carbuncles of batter,
As she wiped the back of her hand to her face,
As sweat tapped bubbling oil her dipped fingers splattered,
Now fragmented is her seamless glove into a kind of lace.

Only she knew how much it cost to wear this accessory,
Ornate with blisters each Sunday as she laid the table,
Only she knew that while ache and scarcity,
Were meaningful threats, she was the more meaningfully able.

Pallets

Beets, Bleeding and Wounded

Untouched, roasted chicken resting in the pan,
Like an amber jewel flush in its setting, its juices,
Dazzling with inclusions of herbs and butter's fat.

The unwashed dishes in the sink,
Piled up like cooked neck bones in a pot,
The sudless dishwater begins to stink.

He braces himself against the counter's edge,
His belly pinched because he leans too long,
His gut still girdled by a t-shirt, soiled beige.

Oregano, red chili peppers, basil, and dill,
Linger in the air like a smoker's burning halo,
As they frame the waiting sun on the window sill.

Collard greens veined as angel's wings, dark beets,
Bleeding and wounded, without her, have given,
Nothing to his tongue and the feast.

Pallets

Autumn in My Once Fancy Eyes

Eyelids, bowed as the heads of feeding, bleating sheep,
Lowly, slowly scuttle across the landscape of flesh,
Across watery inlets of debris in my banked-up creek,
Where once flowed piercing vision afresh.

The aging of leaves smells like damp tobacco,
Churning over themselves, some brown and red,
The deep color of hibiscus tea, the stretched staccato,
Of the metal rake across the worms' rich bed.

Spent, I drink water in the twice-rinsed glass,
Because autumn in my once fancy eyes,
Has jarred-up my clarity with filmy trash,
Not from the leaves' dust, but mortal sight.

Yet, when you are less and less obscure,
Coming to me, coming my way,
I empower my eyes having endured,
All that recalls you before the eclipse of the day.

I must clean every dish, every utensil,
Several times to guarantee that nothing remains,
Left on the glassware like dirt stenciled,
Upon my dotage, my feckless reign.

Returned, I bag the leaves, ready for the compost,
The deglorified and spindly trees at best,
Exchange most verdant length for a ghost's,
Skeletal heavenward signature thrust in my night's unrest.

So, I too shall be swept upon the countryside, reprov'd,
My ground debloomed by this cycle of cataracts,
Sightless, but by you forever moved,
As my summer now November redacts.

Pallets

Crèche

At first, they held five walnuts,
But even this gift was too much,
For her sensitive hands,
Swollen plump as country hams.

She knelt at her bed,
Her arthritic toes shed,
Of everything except cocoa butter,
Her joints knuckled like cut okra.

With palms up, gnarled feet,
Arms, wrists upward-no speech,
For this is all she had to give,
To the baby in the naked crib.

Pallets

Evening Alone

The bread of nighttime has dipped into
The wine of daytime, and the soaking, absorbed
Rouge that is evening works its way up
To the crust, thus staining a bit, my fingers.

The evanescent wine, more reddish than
Purple is the tinge of morning glories, dying and
Blooming with their heads falling like babies',
Fighting sleep against your breasts as nighttime,
Now as thick and black as your thighs,
Overthrows me.

None of you my lovers from the rural townships,
None of you my lovers from the cities in Mississippi,
None of you my lovers, not even you from Chicago,
Is here to lick the unfriendly
Residue of wine from my lips,
From my fingers.

Pallets

Essie's Selma Heifers

(A prose poem)

We want an opulent motivation,
In a work of nonviolence,
An act of nobility in the violence,
As she shifted to the franchise,
Toward casting what her grandmother,
And mother had not struck;
But none of these measured
This woman.

"Who is this looking at me?"
Like a bunch of wide-eyed heifers through,
The barb-wired fence "Heifer-looking bulls,
"Night riders, courthouse fools..."
She counted them like Massa might have counted,
His chattel: Six heads, 11 eyes,
Excluding a closed one owned by Mr. J.C.,
12 feet, 12 legs, all of them ragamuffins;
All of them on the lean-to,
Uneducated side of life, even when,
Learned, no politeness shone.
While Sister did not do it,
Another somebody had knocked the shit
Out of him, loosening his eyeball to
Roll on the ground like a Brussel sprout,
A shitless man's eye just scuttling across,
The floor like a mouse.

It was not fear the heifer-eyed men,
Provoked in the courthouse,
Voter's registration line;
It was grief: Her sister, erect and black, as a
Light pole soaked in creosol, had come,
With her only six weeks after,
Having a baby yellow as cornmeal,
With hair like a Cocker Spaniel;
Back then, having a white man's
Baby did not make you a celebrity.
It was the same look her mother,
Delivered to her daddy, who loved,
The woman and loved three babies,

Pallets

Who were not his; for he was her,
Black Daddy, still. Once and more than,
Once, he fathered them all.
"My Daddy" she loved to say.

Essie took the baby that called
Them both Mama. Both came if
The baby were not looking at just one.
Sister had made it to the eighth,
Grade; Essie had promised her at,
Least two years of college, normal school.
She had heard that if you could get her there,
They would not turn her away. Not today,
Not tomorrow, even if it meant,
Waiting on the illustrious faculty,
As their maid and flunky,
If she wanted to go, Professor Morgan,
A principal and demi-god,
Would vouch for her.
Some came by mule, some came cripple,
Some by oxen, some by automobile,
Some by wagon, some by foot.
Sometimes, Professor Morgan had to choose
Between destinies: If your daddy worked
On the railroad and had electricity,
Even it were just one light-bulb dangling
Like a tooth in the middle of the ceiling,
And another daddy had a kerosene lamp,
And was a sharecropper with earthen floors,
Professor Morgan sent the one with a cotton-
Picking letter of recommendation.

It was the look in her sister's,
Eyes, eight months in domestic,
Work, dropped at the dark end,
Of a light kitchen, dropped from,
Behind, his touch scalding as a,
Dropped pan of yeast rolls.

Yes, the voting boy from the NAACP
Had been meeting with her, all
Of them meeting under the umbrella,
Of societies, churches, juke joints and plantations,
And yes, the death of Preacher-Deacon,

Pallets

Who was really nothing but a,
Hymn-lining young deacon shot with a,
Clean hole in his forehead like a hog lying,
Length-wise, shot by someone
Who knew how to shoot,
A bullet going in like a toothpick, and
Coming out like the leaves of a pineapple in,
The back of his head, brains spilling,
Out like chittlins, a bullet elegant in and
Wild and indiscrete coming out, a bullet
Like Preacher's voice, tenor sharp, ethereal, until
The next thing you know, you would be falling out,
In ecstasy, in apoplexy, down to the savage,
Earth realm.

And yes, when she saw Preacher-Deacon,
Her now shut-up forever Preacher-Deacon,
Her speech forebode her at the cracked crux,
Of each word, and to,
Talk was to be forced to make, a
Fruit cobbler with nothing but the
Once romantic scent of peach peels, brittle, spoiled
Beyond usefulness, faint, inedible words
Crumpled on themselves, but
This time she could not unwrap something,
Out of this scandalous nothing, and yes...
But none of these measured this woman.

It took three trips to the courthouse;
Her niece, laughing Trish, now two years old,
Still round as a rutabaga, went too, marking,
Each attempt as the hands of a living, monkey-shine ,
Playing baby, marking time from an arm baby to a hip baby,
To a walking baby that both spelled and cussed a bit.

It was her baby niece's reaching,
And his joining her turnip-thick wrists,
Reaching for her one-eyed daddy--poll-watching
Mr. J.C.--who claimed his look-alike baby,
But denied the rape, preferring "consummation,"
And she who loved her man, unrighteously dead,
More than she loved the religion
Ringing in the eternal accolades of voting,
Wrote her name, where her older providential sister,

Pallets

Had marked the literacy test with an X,
As had her grandmother's mother in a
Matriarchy of X's, a surname of X's,
But, this Essie, called Sister,
Unvarnished her paralyzed tongue,
Still dry-mouthed with Preacher-Deacon's,
Falling, and prophesied with her
Differently printed and everlasting, "X",
Marked the box of her preferred candidate,
Prophesied to Preacher-Deacon's ever-loving memory,
Prophesied to the baby's precocity,
And she prophesied to herself:

"I got to get this thing off me and this baby's back."

Pallets

Love Song

All night, you swim to me like a voice in vibrato;
My night light is just one gold tooth,
Shining in your mouth of heaven,
Warding off the terrorism of my
Dumbfounded loneliness, calming my
Gaze into the bottom of your lily,
Drawing me into its fluted form like
A master glassmaker whose breath stems
The fire of blackness.

My tears run as oil from your sardine can,
Down the corner of my mouth onto my chin,
Chest hairs, the anointing of my beloved.

My Love, I did not want you and our girls,
Working in our fields and not in,
Some white man's kitchen, and
For this, heavy toil circumcised even the beauty of the
Sun, and made my learned mind engrave
My mysteries, my dreams with a plow on the back of
300 cultivated acres, a back opened
Like it was whipped unmercifully,
Land, beginning at daybreak, full with me and my hired help,
Men, raised up and bowed down like morning glories,
But I loved the land because of what it allowed me to give you.

My Love, no need to serenade me as
I sing to you. As the stars ingratiate themselves,
In your white, kinky hair dripping
Like the lily of the valley.
For I am old: All I need to know is that,
Whether in life or in death, with you
Chauffeured in the limousine Cadillac,
Shining eggplant black,
That you will love me like no other has loved,
Me even as we loved each other during,
These unromantic conditions.

Look at my hands-once the hands of a lover,
The hands of a poet and not a peasant,
But for you I worked so hard,
That my fingers look like unscrubbed ginger.