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The Price of Bubble Gum

I walked through the doors
to Bryant's Grocery store,
for bubble gum. Not knowing
what was to come.

Two cents is all I thought it would
cost me.

But the clerk never told me the
true cost would be
my life.

Sweet, pink bubble gum and a
whistle.

That's what I was worth.
My life's price.

Uncle Moose said stay inside,
As voices dense with anger and
aggression crashed like water
on the rivers rocks
outside.

Their hands were rough,
as they pulled and pried on my

black skin. White calluses
scraped my adolescent arms.
Pulling me, like the current of the
river.

I tried to swim away from their
stream. But the waves of their
river arms out powered my
strokes.

Holding my breath as they
forced me
through the car door
I heard a whistle, sweet sound of
fleeting freedom.

The whistle never left me
as their fist crashed down on me
like waves on a river bank.
Their big bodies broke me.
Broke my bones.
Bones that crunched, cracked,
caved, like sand under boots.

Limpness in my limbs
left me powerless against the
white water rock.

Each boulder breaking me down
more into person putty.
Will they know it's me?

Will they give me the dignity
of identity?

No.

To them I am not human.

The blackness of my skin
is an emblem of sin.

Worthless, dirty, disgusting.

The water of the river baptizes
me as I sink into its coolness.

The waves stop,

I lay as death drowns me.

Relief of realization that it's over,
envelops my soul.

And I am lifted to high
heaven.

Where I whistle and chew pink
bubble gum. ♥

Supplement

The poem “The Price of Bubble Gum,” draws on the story of the young 14 year old boy Emmett Till, who was tortured and lynched on August 28, 1955 Mississippi. He had just come to Mississippi from Chicago by train two weeks prior to the incident. On August 20, 1955, just one week before his death, Emmett went into a grocery shop with some friends. Little did he know that this innocent trip would cost him his life (Madeo, n.d.). Carolyn Bryant, a young white storekeeper, claimed that Emmett had whistled at her while inside the store getting candy. As a result, her husband and brother in law hunted Till down like a dog to make him pay for his actions. Tragically, two of his cousins were witness to Emmett’s vicious kidnapping and had to watch as their family member was ripped away from their arms (“The Murder of Emmett Till,” n.d.). The two men then beat Emmett Till beyond recognition, shot him, and then tossed his body into the Tallahatchie river. In order to weigh his body down, the men used barbed wire attached to a cotton-gin fan. Not only was Till brutally tortured, his killers were acquitted of their crimes by an all white male jury and went on to sell their story for \$4,000 to a magazine (“Emmett Till’s Death,” 2019). This would be equivalent to approximately \$45,000 today. However, when the FBI reopened Till’s case in 2004, they found evidence that there could have been up to 3 white men responsible, as well as two black men who were forced to participate. Emmett Till’s mother chose to have an open casket funeral after seeing the state in which her son’s body was in to make a statement to the community. There were over 50,000 individuals who viewed his body over a 3 day period. She wanted people to recognize what happened to her son and make sure that it sparked change so no one else has to suffer like the Till family did (Dyson, 2015). As of recently, there has been new found evidence of an arrest warrant for Carolyn Bryant dated August 29, 1955, which was never served. This warrant accused her of par-taking in the

kidnapping and murder of Emmett. Despite investigators gathering evidence for decades, a recent Mississippi grand jury refused to indict Bryant for her involvement in the event (Rojas, 2022). Although Till's death helped serve as a catalyst of the civil right's movement, this fact shows that over 50 years later, the United States as a whole still refuses to acknowledge and make right the severe injustice done to Emmett Till. We may possibly never be able to correct our mistakes regarding this innocent young boy.

We chose this event for the project because it demonstrates the state that African Americans were and are still undergoing. Though it is not to the same extent as it was then, violence in the black community is still a prevalent issue and by not speaking on what happened in their past, those who experience privilege are undermining the hardships that black individuals face. African Americans were subjected to unacceptable behavior from white folks, and this behavior was being protected by our criminal justice system. Emmett Till's murderers' charges were dismissed and they never suffered repercussions for their actions. The beginning of the poem describes Till simply going on about his day, entering a grocery store, when all of a sudden, he became a target unbeknownst to him. Going into that grocery store would cost him the rest of his life. The fourth stanza demonstrates a quick mood change in the poem. The waves in the river symbolize the beating Till endured from the white men. Later in the poem, the whistle is introduced. This whistle represents the catalyst of this event as the alleged victim made accusations against Till stating he whistled at her. The whistle is reintroduced in the eighth stanza, representing the afterlife calling out to him, for this whistle stays with him until the end. The long lasting whistle is demonstrative of how false allegations are detrimental to someone's personhood. Each element of the river: boulders, waves, and streams all represent each and every hit the attackers landed on Till. The tenth stanza references the fact that the attackers left Till

almost unrecognizable due to the brutal beating. Until finally, Till reaches the afterlife where he can enjoy his pink bubblegum forever.

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