



# Blood, Sweat and Tears

Precious Lovell



## Slave Narratives

**T**he work of Precious Lovell (b. 1959, Pilot Mountain, NC) aims to honor, remember and re-animate her heritage through the medium of cloth. Against the ravages of time, fragility of memory and expediency of politics, she translates the lives of historical African-Americans into poignant visual meditations. From well-known heroes to people barely recognized by records, she gathers tales of those who suffered through difficult times in her people's history.

The triptych *Blood, Sweat and Tears* is inspired by a series of such stories told by slaves, and their fellow slaves, while living on 18th and 19th century plantations in the Southern United States. This book collects pieces of these painful, but indelible narratives, so that you may read the words that inform the adjacent garments.

For reference and further reading, a bibliography can be found on the back pages of this volume.





**Blood**

## BLOOD

**I** never saw a jail for slaves, but I have seen slaves whipped. I saw Crayton Abernathy, a overseer, whip a woman in a cotton path on Doc Smith's farm, a mile from our plantation. I also saw old man Crump, a owner, whip a man and some children. He waited till Sunday morning to whip his slaves. He would get ready to go to church, have his horse hitched up to the buggy, and then call his slaves out and whip them before he left for church. He generally whipped about five children every Sunday morning.

Elias Thomas (*My Folks Don't Want Me To Talk About Slavery: Twenty-One Oral Histories of Former North Carolina Slaves*)

## BLOOD

**M**arster treated his niggers mean sometimes. He beat my mother till the scars was on her back, so I could see them.

Patsy Mitchner (*My Folks...*)

## BLOOD

One morning I entered Mrs. Lewis' room, and she was in a room adjoining, complaining of something I had neglected. Mr. L. then enquired if I had done my work. I told him I had. She flew into a rage and told him I was saucy, and to strike me, and he immediately gave me a severe blow with a stick of wood, which inflicted a deep wound upon my head. The blood ran over my clothing, which gave me a frightful appearance.

Mattie L. Jackson (*Six Women's Slave Narratives*)



## BLOOD

**M**aster, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave-holding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.

Frederick Douglass (*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*)

## BLOOD

**M**y mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, "Oh! pray - Oh! pray - Oh! pray" - these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any further. ... Experience has taught me that nothing can be more heart-rending than for one to see a dear and beloved mother or sister tortured, and to hear their cries, and not be able to render them assistance. But such is the position which an American slave occupies.

William Wells Brown (*Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*)

## BLOOD

**E**very morning my grandmother would pray, and old man Heard despised to hear any one pray, saying they were only doing so that they might become free niggers. Just as sure as the sun would rise, she would get a whipping; but this did not stop her prayers every morning before day. This particular time grandmother Sylvia was in “family way” and that morning she began to pray as usual. The master heard her and became so angry he came to her cabin seized and pulled her clothes from her body and tied her to a young sapling. He whipped her so brutally that her body was raw all over.

Celestia Avery (*Georgia Slave Narrative: Tales of Conjure*)



**Sweat**

**SWEAT**

**A** slave better pick a hundred pounds of cotton in a day. You better pick a hundred.

*Fannie Dorum (Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938. Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2)*

## SWEAT

**T**he hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night.

No matter how fatigued and weary he may be - no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest - a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight - if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling.

Solomon Northrup (*There is No Such Thing as Rest*)

## SWEAT

**T**he times I hated most was pickin' cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open and bleed.

Mary Reynolds (*American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*)



# Tears



## TEARS

**A**bout the worst thing that ever I seed, though, was a slave woman at Louisburg who had been sold off from her three-weeks-old baby, and was being marched to New Orleans.

She had walked till she was give out, and she was weak enough to fall in the middle of the road. She was chained with twenty or thirty other slaves, and they stopped to rest in the shade of a big oak while the speculators et their dinner. As I pass by, this woman begs me in God's name for a drink of water, and I gives it to her. I ain't never be so sorry for nobody.

Josephine Smith (*My Folks...*)

## TEARS

**B**ut to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. .... I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! all gone! Why don't God kill me?"

Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*)

## TEARS

**S**lavery was the worst days was ever seed in the world. They was things past tellin', but I got the scars on my old body to show to this day. I seed worse than what happened to me. I seed them put the men and women in the stock with they hands screwed down through holes in the board and they feets tied together and they naked behinds to the world. Solomon the the [sic] overseer beat them with a big whip and massa look on. The niggers better not stop in the fields when they hear them yellin'. They cut the flesh most to the bones and some they was when they taken them out of stock and put them on the beds, they never got up again.

Mary Reynolds (*American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*)



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