

# **Poetry Review of Jabari Asim's STOP AND FRISK**



# *Stop and Frisk*

american poems

PC

J A B A R I A S I M

*"This book challenges the boundaries of the art by being, in a very good sense of the word, documentary." —Robert Pinsky*

1.

They say

Stop-and-frisk

Is a *brief* and *non-intrusive stop* of a *suspect*.

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you a *suspect*

Even. When you aren't.

2.

They say

In order to *stop*

Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a crime.

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you a *criminal*

Even. When you aren't.

3.

They say

In order to *frisk*

Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a gun

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you *armed and dangerous*

Even when.

Even. Even. Even. Even. Even when you aren't.

4.

They say

The word *reasonable*

When statistics show police in America are  
*Racist.*

5.

Jabari Asim's poems sing and scream *America.*

6.

And here

Here is what is true about America.

7.

America is racist.

America is unjust.

And being black.

Black in this

America is dangerous.

8.

How being black in America

Can get you.

Get you killed.

9.

*The Talk* is instructional.

How being black in America means giving the talk

Talk to children.

How there is

A hope it will keep them

Alive.

Asim writes –

*It's more than time we had that talk  
about what to say and where to walk,  
how to act and how to strive,  
how to be upright and stay alive.  
(The Talk)*

But throughout Asim's poetry there is  
A painful futility.

How being black in America means *no matter*.

No matter. What someone does. How many  
Talks they have. How high. Up in the air they  
Raise their hands. Where police can see them.  
No matter how many times  
They do as they are told. During another and  
Another and another traffic stop. No matter  
How many times they  
Say *no* and *yes* or *please don't kill me*

It will not matter

And they might get killed anyway –

*But still there is no guarantee  
that you will make it home to me.  
Despite all our care and labor,  
you might frighten a cop or neighbor  
whose gun sends you to endless sleep,  
proving life's unfair and talk is cheap.  
(The Talk)*

## **10.**

Asim gives us America.  
All its unfurled and bloody white supremacy.  
He marches America up and down the pages  
Of *Stop and Frisk*

Like a parade.

And makes us.

Makes us watch.

Makes us listen.

Makes us *watch and listen*.

And wonder *what the hell*.

How I am wondering *what the hell I am doing here*.

Standing. On the grass. Holding an American flag.

## 11.

In *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence and Menace to Society*,

Asim structures the poems as police dispatch calls.

Where a dispatcher sends police to a scene of someone who is Black and doing nothing wrong

Encouraging police to respond

Brutally.

## 12.

The woman in *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence* is a woman

In her fifties. A grandmother armed. With a pink purse.

Walking

Eastbound on 1-10. Or how the dispatcher uses the word *suspect*.

Or how the dispatcher says she will resist by walking away slowly.

And how. How police should respond –

*Throw her on her back and squeeze her  
between your thighs.*

*Raise your fist high and punch her face  
until she is still.*

*(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)*

Or how –

*She may resist by  
continuing to breathe, in which case  
raise your fist high and continue  
to punch  
(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)*

### **13.**

The woman in *Menace to Society* is a professor.  
Not a menace. How the dispatcher calls her in  
Anyway –

*Attention all units,  
black woman walking  
outside the lines  
near College and 5<sup>th</sup>.  
(Menace to Society)*

The dispatcher warns police. How –

*She may resist by flexing her vocabulary,  
insisting on respect and kicking your shin.  
(Menace to Society)*

At which point –

*consider your life in danger.  
Be advised that promising to slam her  
conforms to university police patrol,  
as does twisting her arm behind her back  
before you throw her to the ground.  
(Menace to Society)*

### **14.**

Asim's *Walking While Black* is an American  
Play  
In three acts.

How it starts with –

*A man walking in the middle of the road.*

*A man walking in the middle.*

*A man walking.*

*A man.*

*(Walking While Black)*

Then the muzzle flash. Blast. And whip of a gun –

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*Firing*

*(Walking While Black)*

Or how this American play ends painfully. Predictably –

*A man dying in the middle of the road.*

*A man dying in the middle.*

*A man.*

*Dying.*

*Heat.*

*(Walking While Black)*

Curtains start to shiver. Before lowering. Smattered

Applause. Hands coming together again and again.

This impact of a performance that happens every

Day in America. When you are black in America.

**15.**

Asim's *Stop and Frisk* poetry is a poignant profile



Of a racist America. Heartbreaking poems about  
People who are racially profiled.

**16.**

A man looks for loose cigarettes outside a gas  
Station. Making noise in *Cancer Sold Separately*.

Asim writes –

*Apparently he slept on the surgeon general's warning  
to black men: bellowing in public  
may be hazardous to your health.  
(Cancer Sold Separately)*

**17.**

Again. In *Loosies*. The warning –

*Enough loosies over time can be hazardous to health,  
As deadly as breaking up a fight in an intersection crowded  
With witnesses or dashing through drizzle for Skittles and  
tea.  
(Loosies)*

A man rummages in the glove compartment of his own car  
In front of his own house –

*But a black man in the middle  
of the night knows better than  
looking for loosies beyond his own driveway.  
Safer instead to root around the glovebox  
For that previous, planned-ahead pack.  
(Loosies)*

The man. The man  
Rummages in the glove compartment of his own  
Car. In front of. Front of. Of his own house. And  
Gets shot at by the police –

*Later he'd say it felt like a firing squad  
when deputies opened up from behind, leaving him  
not only smokeless but sixty years old and shot in the leg.  
Suspected of stealing his own car in front of his own house,  
he thought his neighbor was joking when he heard a  
command to put his hands in the air.  
(Loosies)*

**18.**

*This is a profile. Of an unjust America.  
That does not care. Care about the pain  
Of being black and brutalized in America.*

**19.**

*Of course, there is the accusation. White  
Supremacist accusation of –*

*All he had to do was comply and he would not be dead.  
Tough shit and too damn bad.  
(Found Poem #2)*

*In One thousand chokeholds from now,  
It powerfully lingers.*

*Or how Asim's poetic response is a  
Measurement of necks squeezed or  
Choked and strangled. He writes –*

*One thousand chokeholds from now,  
Black and brown people will no longer insist on access to  
taxis.  
They will not step into elevators when white women are already  
inside.  
(One thousand chokeholds from now)*

**20.**

*Because how many chokeholds will it take.*

How many beaten bodies. Bloodied cheeks.  
How many  
Broken hyoid bones  
Snapping strangled necks. How many. How  
Many penetrated raw rectums. How many  
Will it take.

**21.**

Or what it does. What is does. To people  
When a country does this.

**22.**

In *We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong*  
Asim shows the effects of racism and injustice in America by  
Manipulating font. Using a strikethrough. And crossing out  
All the references to rights. Or how. All that's left are  
words  
And lines like this –

*remain silent*

*broken*

*choke*

*you're next*

*(We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong)*

**23.**

Every poem in *Stop and Frisk* is an answer  
To the question of compliance. The accusation  
of *One thousand chokeholds from now.*

Because no matter how many necks get choked.

No matter.

Backs or chests get

Shot up.

No matter how many abdomens get ripped up. High velocity  
Muzzle or shred intestines. No matter how many heads get  
Shot. Bloody hole matted by hair and follicles. No matter  
How many.

**24.**

The. Brutality. Will. Not. Stop.

**25.**

*Furtive Movements* gives us names. A poem  
Made up of names. First names last names.  
Targeted by racial profiling. And brutalized  
By police. How almost all of them are dead.

Killed by police.

**26.**

Because Eleanor Bumpurs did not leave when evicted. How police  
Shot her dead. Because Tyisha Miller was unconscious in a  
broken  
Down car. How she had a gun in her lap or when police woke  
her.  
She sat up and grabbed it. And they shot her 23 times. And  
dead.  
Because when his football hit a police car. How Anthony Baez.  
He  
Resisted arrest. And police choked him. How he died of  
asphyxiation.  
Because Jonathan Ferrell crashed his car. Went to a house.  
Banged  
On the door. Or how he ran at police. And they shot him 12  
times.  
Dead. Because Claude Reese was 14 and standing on stairs in  
such  
Darkness. How police thought he was holding a gun. How he  
wasn't.

How the bullet entered his skull behind his left ear and how.  
It never  
Came back out. Because Amadou Diallo looked like someone else.  
Or  
Did not put his hands up in the air. How he reached in his  
pocket for  
His wallet. But they shot him. Shot him and shot him 41 times  
dead.  
Because. Because Michael Wayne Clark. Because Jonny Gammage  
Did not pull over. Because Oscar Grant. Police had him face-  
down.  
On a subway platform. Shot him in the back close range.  
Because  
Police beat Mohammed Assassa when he struggled. Broke it.  
Broke  
His hyoid bone when they strangled him. Because police hit the  
car  
That Sean Bell was driving. Hit it with more than 50 bullets.  
Because.  
The Central Park Five were innocent. Because LaTanya Haggerty  
was  
A passenger in a pursued car. How police thought she had a  
gun. But  
She was talking on a cell phone. And police shot her dead.  
Because.  
Henry Dumas came through the turnstile. Shot dead. Because  
Sonji  
Taylor was on the roof of a hospital. How police say she  
lunged at  
Them with a knife. But they shot her 7 times in her back.  
Because.  
Jordan Davis. Because Johnny Robinson threw rocks at a car  
draped  
In the Confederate flag. Because Eula Love resisted. How it  
was over  
An unpaid gas bill. Because Michael Stewart sprayed graffiti.  
How

Police hog tied him. And then choked him to death. Because  
Rekia  
Boyd was in a park. Because Prince Jamel. Because Gavin  
Eiberto  
Saldana. Because Aiyana Jones was 7 and in a house that got  
raided.  
How police shot her. How it was the wrong house. Because  
Marcillus  
Was homeless and sleeping in a bush. How he threatened a K-9  
dog  
With a screwdriver. Police shot him dead. Because Rodney King.  
And  
Everyone. How everyone saw. Because Abner Louima got strip  
searched  
Outside a nightclub. Police kicked him in the testicles. Raped  
him at the  
Station with a broomstick. Broke teeth when they shoved it in  
his mouth.  
Because Kenneth Chamberlain was wearing a medical necklace.  
Because  
Julio Nunez. Because Patrick Dorismond. Because Jimmie Lee  
Jackson who  
Police shot in Selma. How he was unarmed. Because. Because.  
Because.

## 27.

Their names are eulogy.

Presented in *Furtive Movements* as a list. Their  
Brutalized bodies paraded out. The letters that  
Make up their names are the drumbeats rolling  
The low guttural groan of a tuba. This screaming  
Trombone. Or how Asim capitalizes some of the  
Letters. These are the lyrics to the song that is his  
Poem. How it reads *FUCK THA POLICE*.

## 28.

But we cannot. Let's not. Forget  
Renisha McBride. Crashed her car –

*Renisha reeling  
Head full of fire, wreck and  
Ruin behind her.  
(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)*

How Renisha ran to a nearby house  
For help.

For help and Theodore Wafer came  
To the door. Shot her through it. The  
Screen door dead.

Let's not. Let's not. Let's not forget  
How racism and injustice in America  
Is all encompassing. Dark streets or  
Racist neighbors. How a bullet can  
Tear through a screen door like  
Skin. Which is why. Which is why –

*No more odes for the Confederate dead.  
Let's grieve for Renisha instead,  
All the Renishas, the broken sisters crushed to dust  
And bone in our neighbor's tangled pathologies.  
(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)*

## 29.

Asim makes the powerful point in his poems  
Not to. Not to forget women. Because racism  
And injustice in America crosses and breaks  
Gender lines. Being black and a man in this  
Country means. Getting thrown against the  
Hood of a car. Cheek bone. Zygomatic bone  
Crushed. Horseshoe hyoid bone fractured

From the gripping. Pressing and strangling.

Or shot dead.

But so are women.

And girls.

Because when you are black in America  
And a woman. Racism and injustice in  
America means you may be expendable.

**30.**

Asim's poems *don't start none*, *A House Is Not*, and *Wild Things*  
Offer a portrait of a woman caught up in the racism and  
injustice  
Of America. She is an abused wife who. Finally shoots at him.  
Her  
Abuser. She is –

*A woman wreathed in smoke,  
standing her ground.  
(don't start none)*

And when she misses. Bullets hitting air. How police come.

Drag her half naked outside. Breasts exposed. Outside of  
Her apartment complex and her neighbors. How they are  
Standing and watching and filming. Or police. How there  
Are 12 officers. So many. So many men. Asim writes –

*Good men stood all around all around the good men stood all  
around  
(Wild Things)*

Conjuring. For her and for us. A memory of –

*your great-grandmother  
raped by white men with guns on the dirt floor of a bar what  
she*



*remembered most were those who stood and watched, doing  
nothing  
(Wild Things)*

**31.**

Asim's poetry serves as a gut-wrenching indictment.

How brutality may come in the shape a man's hands make  
When he wraps them around the neck of another man and  
Squeezes until he kills him. How brutality is also standing on  
The stairs of an apartment complex and watching a woman  
Dragged out of her apartment by police. Her breasts exposed  
And the skin of the back of her thighs and buttocks scraping  
Raw against cement.

This is the parade.

Parade of what America is. And who is responsible.

**32.**

Or Relisha. In *Vanishing Point*. A child in a DC shelter  
with –

*A numb mom and three hungry brothers,  
dirt, scabs, bedbugs, and a teddy bear  
named Baby.  
(Vanishing Point)*

How the janitor preys on her. Reveals his plan to  
Groom her with candy. And kidnap her. Or how.

It will not matter. Because –

*Don't nobody care about these kids.  
Half they mamas don't want 'em  
and the city sure don't.  
(Vanishing Point)*

**33.**

*Vanishing Point* is terrifying.

That moment. The one where Relisha will  
Disappear –

*You'll see her for the last time at Holiday Inn,  
Pink boots and paper bags streaming light  
From a security camera.  
(Vanishing Point)*

But Relisha is just one. Just one.

One of the already. Forgotten.

**34.**

In *The Disappeared* Asim writes –

*Every portrait posted on the Black and Missing website  
looks like someone I know.  
(The Disappeared)*

How –

*Sixty-four thousand  
mostly missing in New York, Georgia,  
North Carolina, Maryland, and Florida:  
signs of struggle, prints wiped clean,  
empty cars with engines running.  
(The Disappeared)*

**35.**

The dead and gone haunt Asim's poetry.

Or how they should. Should haunt all of us.

**36.**

In *Young Americans*, they march in the streets –  
*Dead children make mad noise*

*when they march. The doomed, solemn-eyed youth  
of Chicago are putting boots in the ground,  
gathering in ghostly numbers  
to haunt us with their disappointment.  
(Young Americans)*

How they will keep marching. Keep marching.

How —

*The slaughtered innocents of Chicago  
ain't going nowhere gently.  
Circling the sad metropolis  
in loud, unearthly ranks,  
they raise their voices to the bloody sky,  
above the roar of the monstrous guns and the  
bullets, falling like fat rain.  
(Young Americans)*

**37.**

Asim shows us America.

America where being black means  
A bullet will come for you. Where  
Police will come for you. America  
Where you will be forgotten even  
As you lay on the floor of a subway  
Platform. Police knee in your back.

Laying on the on ramp of a freeway  
Pinned. Pinned between the thighs  
Of a police officer.  
Where you struggle. Struggle to just  
Breathe one more time. Pleading.  
Pleading for your humanity to be  
Remembered.

**38.**

The men and women and boys and girls  
Brutalized and beaten. Raped and killed  
For being black in America march in the  
Powerful and heartbreaking poetry of  
*Stop and Frisk.*

**39.**

Poems that are snare and are bass.  
Skin stretched over the drum of this  
Country. Poems that are percussion  
Of police brutality. Pounding beat in

This American parade

Of black bodies assaulted. Performative  
High step. Poems that are the alto and  
Tenor. The deep bassoon.

Sharp piccolo of human pain.

**40.**

Poems that are 8 and 8s on loop. That  
Are feet hitting cement. Feet strapped  
In showstoppers and patent leathered  
Marjorette boots. Leather tassels that  
Shake. Heels smacking asphalt.

**41.**

Asim's poems sing and

Scream *America.*

**42.**

How every day America assembles its  
Racist and unjust formation. And how.  
Every day. Racism and injustice march

In an endless and brutal loop.

**43.**

I am a white woman.

Asim's poems coil around me like a marching  
Tuba. Around my body like a metal snake.

How they blare what is true in my ears.

These are American poems.

These are beautiful brutal bloodied American  
Poems.