

Poetry Review of Jabari Asim's STOP AND FRISK



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 5th.

(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.