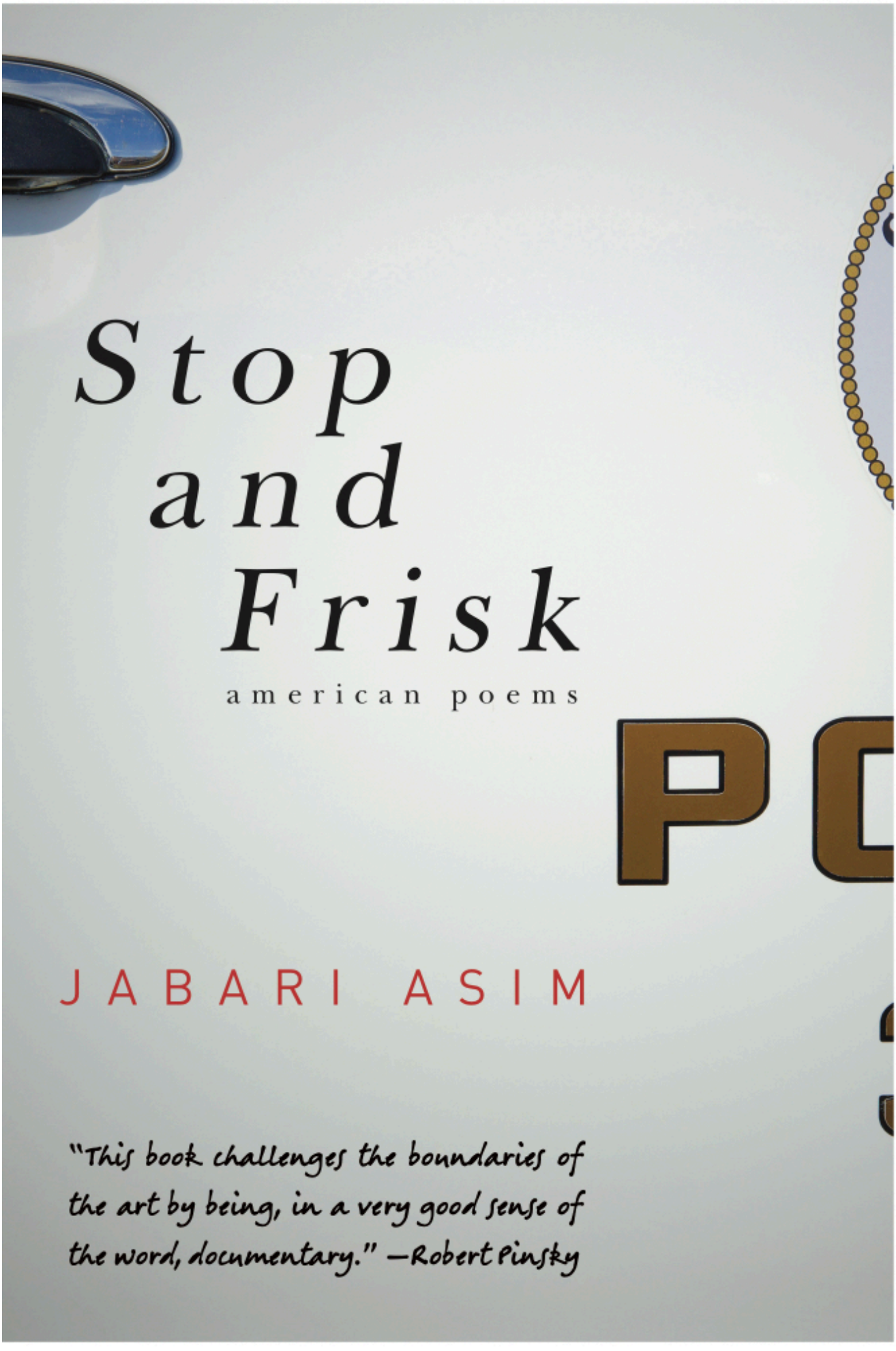
Poetry Review of Jabari Asim's STOP AND FRISK


Stop
and
Frisk
american poems
JABARI ASIM
"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 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.

New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of “vertigo and nausea,” she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*’s title essay, she shares some of the professionals’ feedback:

Patient’s [results]… emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into

a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure…

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* "Woman of the Year." It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

I watched Robert Kennedy's funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell…[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child…[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for "a long time." Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.

She adds, a few pages later: "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

*

Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion’s secret weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In THE WHITE ALBUM, she attends The Doors’ recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor’s mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, “a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust

them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

*

That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels *and* Hell's Angels '69*. I saw* Run Angel Run *and* The Glory Stompers *and* The Losers*. I saw* The Wild Angels*, I saw* Violent Angels*, I saw* The Savage Seven *and I saw* The Cycle Savages*. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times*. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future…to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had

Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, “whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation.”

*

Throughout all these mental rovings runs Didion’s usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It’s the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She’s not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that “the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes.” A reader can’t help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she’s on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: “Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious…Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas.”

*

Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of ‘68. Today, it is August 10th. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who’ve come out to oppose them. (It should be noted

that these are grown men who call themselves “boys,” and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, “The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you’ll be a movie star, the way you look. That’ll be next, right?”

Oakley looked stricken. “Yes, sir,” he said.

*

Now it’s August 13th and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De’Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De’Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you’d see in any suburban town. He doesn’t pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De’Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De’Von Bailey’s parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike’s Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant

sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, “WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?” They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. “Just until he can find other work,” he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De’Von Bailey’s family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: “NO POLICE BRUTALITY.” On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set

forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

*

The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: “Please Let Me Live Past 19.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” Several signs say, “Imagine If It Were Your Son.” The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the “allies” like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.


JUSTICE
DEVON

Rally for De’Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There’s a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, “JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE.” The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don’t see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their “Peace Academy” sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who’s questioning the Baileys’ white attorneys. “How do we know,” the woman is asking, “that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?”

(Next to me, three of the “Moms Demand” moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)


R.I.P
JEFFREY
DO JUSTICE
LOVE MERC
WALK HUMB
NOW.

Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?…" Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "…White *women*?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied? I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment– and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of – I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

*

That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

“No, not at all,” he says almost immediately. “Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all.”

I recall Didion’s essay “In the Islands,” which I’ve recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101st American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

“And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death, RFK’s,” my husband is saying.

“And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before,” I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

“Sure. Now I think it’s the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable.”

I think he’s right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn’t. She’s not a calm person by nature; she’s anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She’s 84 now. She’s survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I’m not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, “writing has not helped me to see what it means.”

*

Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It’s as if the hours of sleep she’s had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, “I’m excited for tomorrow!”

I turn around, laughing. “Why?!”

She laughs, too. “I don’t know!”

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there’s only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.