

POEMS ABOUT POLICE VIOLENCE



Collected by Mariame Kaba

Project NIA

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**Poem about Police Violence
by June Jordan**

Tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop
you think the accident rate would lower subsequently?
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
comes back to my mouth and I am quiet
like Olympian pools from the running
mountainous snows under the sun
sometimes thinking about the 12th House of the Cosmos
or the way your ear ensnares the tip
of my tongue or signs that I have never seen
like DANGER WOMEN WORKING
I lose consciousness of ugly bestial rapid
and repetitive affront as when they tell me
18 cops in order to subdue one man
18 strangled him to death in the ensuing scuffle
(don't you idolize the diction of the powerful: *subdue*
and *scuffle* my oh my) and that the murder
that the killing of Arthur Miller on a Brooklyn
street was just a "justifiable accident" again
(Again)
People been having accidents all over the globe
so long like that I reckon that the only
suitable insurance is a gun
I'm saying war is not to understand or rerun
war is to be fought and won
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
blots it out/the bestial but
not too often tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy

then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop
you think the accident rate would lower subsequently

Third Degree
By Langston Hughes

Hit me! Jab me!
Make me say I did it.
Blood on my sport shirt
And my tan suede shoes.

Faces like jack-o'-lanterns
In gray slouch hats.

Slug me! Beat me!
Scream jumps out
Like blow-torch.
Three kicks between the legs
That kill the kids
I'd make tomorrow.

Bars and floor skyrocket
And burst like Roman candles.

When you throw
Cold water on me,
I'll sign the
Paper...

On Police Brutality
By Margaret Walker Alexander

Recently, a reporter from *Mother Jones* magazine came to see me and asked how I could live in Mississippi with all the police brutality there. I wrote an answer to him in the form of a poem and here it is-

On Police Brutality:

I remember Memorial Day Massacre
Nineteen thirty-seven in Chicago.
And I was in the Capital of D.C.
May of nineteen seventy-one
When they beat all those white heads
And put two thousand souls in jail.
I wasn't in South Commons Boston
Neither when Crispus Attucks died
Nor South Boston when the rednecks rioted.
But I remember Boston
Where I couldn't buy a hot pastrami sandwich
In a greasy joint.
I remember living there in fear
Much as some would feel in Mississippi
I was neither in Watts, Los Angeles, California
In nineteen sixty-five
Nor Detroit in nineteen sixty-seven
And I remember all the fuss over LeRoi Jones
In Newark, New Jersey, too.
Now Santa Barbara, California is remembered
As a separate incident, a separate thing
From Kent State in Ohio
And Jackson State in Mississippi
And Orangeburg, South Carolina
And Texas Southern
But to me, they were all of one piece
Of the same old racist rag.
And all of these things are part
Of what I call Police Brutality.

Southern Cop
By Sterling Brown

Let us forgive Ty Kendricks.
The place was Darktown. He was young.
His nerves were jittery. The day was hot.
The Negro ran out of the alley.
And so Ty shot.

Let us understand Ty Kendricks.
The Negro must have been dangerous.
Because he ran;
And here was a rookie with a chance
To prove himself a man.

Let us condone Ty Kendricks
If we cannot decorate.
When he found what the Negro was running for,
It was too late;
And all we can say for the Negro is
It was unfortunate.

Let us pity Ty Kendricks.
He has been through enough,
Standing there, his big gun smoking,
Rabbit-scared, alone,
Having to hear the wenches wail
And the dying Negro moan.

Black Power
(For All the Beautiful Black Panthers East)
By Nikki Giovanni

But the whole thing is a miracle – See?

We were just standing there
talking – not touching or smoking

Pot

When this cop told

Tyrone

Move along buddy – take your whores
outa here

And this tremendous growl

From out of nowhere

Pounced on him

Nobody to this very day

Can explain

How it happened

And none of the zoos or circuses

Within fifty miles

Had reported

A panther

Missing

**Amadou Diallo From Guinea to the Bronx Dead on Arrival
By Carlos Raul Dufflar (New York)**

Bang Bang Bang
Forty-one shots
Forty-one shots

Did we get him?
Did we get that animal?
Did we get that black animal?

We only needed nineteen shots!

Every second of every minute
Every hour of each day
from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York to Toronto
to Philadelphia to Vancouver to Detroit to Newark to Hartford
unarmed men – and women – die under the hands
of the trigger happy Death Squad Unit

I am not a hired killer
I am not a member of the KKK
White Aryan Brotherhood
or the Church of Creation
I'm only doing my job.

The countless cries of

No Justice No Peace
No Justice No Peace

I hear the sound of the human cry
from the soul through the heart
I hear the cries of brothers and sisters
of human love **loss**
above the blue horizon skies

And if I dream on a dark night
my love guides the sound of unity
before we will perish under the
KKK US Nazi Aryan Brotherhood

We ain't gonna be stopped
and we are gonna move
before words will mean nothing
and death will fall on us all

I hear the cry of

Backward Never
Forward Forever

I hear the cries of mothers and fathers
I hear the rhythm of the bata drum calling us

Justice Now Justice Now Justice Now

Source: *Bum Rush the Page* Edited by Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera (2001).

Amadou

By James E. Cherry (Jackson, TN)

Each night as I step beyond the four
walls of my apartment, the wind awaits
and wails like a mother delivering her
child to auction blocks on Southern
courthouse steps.

Your name has become a cry falling
upon stone ears of justice, who remains
unbalanced and unyielding in deferred
silence and truth.

The world heard the New York night ex-
plode into 41 pieces of bone and bullet,
scattering dreams and family bonds over
oceanic tides, your spirit caught up
with those of the ancestors, leaving
bruised flesh crumbled on vestibule floors,
its carpet insatiable like a sponge.

Now what will halt the anger of demanding
feet, who shall wipe away pain streaking
our cheeks, where will our screams go that
become entangled among the clouds, when will
the Constitution no longer be antiquated
words on mildewed paper, how am I to sing
America's song when lamentations are
lodged within my throat?

I must move on. The sun has fallen
into the earth. I have become a mere shadow,
standing here my wallet is way too black.
And with each step I take, the wind howls,
Amadou, Amadou,
Amadou.

Source: *Bum Rush the Page* Edited by Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera (2001).

The Usual Suspects
By Reginald Harris (Baltimore)

Black Male, 6.2", 28, wearing drooping baggy jeans,
patterned boxers, tan work boots. May be carrying
a gun

Black Male, 16, dark blue sweats and skullcap. Last seen running
south on Main.

Black Male, 30, red Chicago Bulls tank top and matching
shorts. Arrested on the corner with other Black Males ages
32, 27, 19, 12

Black Male, 42, unkempt beard, dirty clothes, no
permanent address. Has not bathed in weeks.

Black Male, driving late model car. Reason for detention:
Busted tail light, weaving/unsure driving, possible expired
tags or license, no reason for him to be in this neighborhood
at this hour anyway

Black Male, 19, dreadlocks, oversized clothes
claims to be a "rapper"

Black Male, 30, says he is "a poet." Beat him into
silence. **Rap** them blind

Black Man, 50, says he is a college professor. See
how well he grades papers handcuffed in a cell

Black Man, 57. Occupation: jazz musician. Has clippings
in pocket as quote-unquote proof. Burn them

Black Man, 39. Protests he has no interest in, would never rape
a woman. Says he's gay. Mention this when throwing him
in cell with other inmates. If not one now, he will be
once they're done

Endangered Species

By AI

The color of violence is black.
Those are the facts, spread-eagled
against a white background,
where policemen have cornered the enemy,
where he shouldn't be, which is seen.
Of course, they can't always believe their eyes,
so they have to rely on instinct,
which tells them I am incapable
of civilized behavior,
therefore, I am guilty
of driving through my own neighborhood
and must take my punishment
must relax and enjoy
like a good boy.
If not, they are prepared to purge me
of my illusions of justice, of truth,
which is indeed elusive,
much like Sasquatch,
whose footprints and shit
are the only physical evidence
of what cannot be proved to exist,
much like me,
the "distinguished" professor of lit,
pulled from my car,
because I look suspicious.
My briefcase, filled with today's assignment
could contain drugs,
instead of essays arranged
according to quality of content,
not my students' color of skin,
but then who am I to say
that doesn't require a beating too? –
a solution that leaves no confusion
as to who can do whatever he wants to whom,

because there is a line directly
from slave to perpetrator,
to my face staring out of newspapers and TV,
or described over and over as a black male.
I am deprived of my separate identity
and must always be a race instead of a man
going to work in the land of opportunity,
because slavery didn't really disappear.
It simply put on a new mask
and now it feeds off fear
that is mostly justified,
because the suicides of the ghetto
have chosen to take somebody with them
and it may as well be you
passing through fire,
as I'm being taught
that injustice is merely another way
of looking at the truth.

At some point, we will meet
at the tip of the bullet,
the blade, or the whip
as it draws blood,
but only one of us will change,
only one of us will slip
past the captain and crew of this ship
and the other submit to the chains
of a nation
that delivered rhetoric
in exchange for its promises.

Men In Blue

By Adam Abdul Hakeem #88T2550-D-1-27 (Great Meadow Correction Facility)

As I sit within this Prison of Pain
Searching endlessly, in mindless gain,
Reflecting life's comic outrage.

Society's laws they say I broke,
Not wanting to be the police's joke
Dealing drugs for the men in blue – as well as DAs too,
Yea, those sent to "protect" me and you...

They run the hoods citywide
Stealing young souls, and the young can't hide
Spreading terror far and wide,
The men in blue: They take our pride.

To those of us who refuse to abide,
The word hit the streets that one must fly

Patrolmen, DAs, Judges, Detectives, Inspectors: High,
Living on drug money, hands in the pie –
All saying, "Larry Davis must die."

So now I sit within this Prison of Pain
With the men in blue trying their best to torment my brain.
I took my stand – I stood with pride!
Hopefully teaching young brother and sisters
That there's no need to hide!

Through pain and suffering, one grows strong.
My strength is yours, let's move on
Fighting the drug dealing
DAs, Judges and men in blue
Never give up, I AM WITH YOU.

Source: Black Prison Movements USA (1995)

Power
By Audre Lorde

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles
and my stomach
churns at the imagined taste while
my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said "Die you little motherfucker" and
there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
this policeman said in his own defense
"I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
only the color". And
there are tapes to prove that, too.

Today that 37 year old white man
with 13 years of police forcing
was set free

by eleven white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one Black Woman who said
"They convinced me" meaning
they had dragged her 4'10" black Woman's frame
over the hot coals
of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go
the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction
within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

Audre Lorde, "Power" from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. Copyright ©
1978 by Audre Lorde.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1997)

For the Record
In memory of Eleanor Bumpers
by Audre Lorde

Call out the colored girls
and the ones who call themselves Black
and the ones who hate the word nigger
and the ones who are very pale

Who will count the big fleshy women
the grandmother weighing 22 stone
with the rusty braids
and gap-toothed scowl
who wasn't afraid of Armageddon
the first shotgun blast tore her right arm off
the one with the butcher knife
the second blew out her heart
through the back of her chest
and I am going to keep writing it down
how they carried her body out of the house
dress torn up around her waist
uncovered
past tenants and the neighborhood children
a mountain of Black Woman
and I am going to keep telling this
if it kills me
and it might in ways I am
learning

The next day Indira Gandhi
was shot down in her garden
and I wonder what these two 67-year old
colored girls
are saying to each other now
planning their return
and they weren't even
sisters.

The following poem comes from a book called Two Hundred Nights and One Day written by Margaret (Peggy) Rozga. Two Hundred Nights is a unique book of poetry that recounts the history of the Milwaukee Open Housing Campaign in 1967. This campaign was led by a civil rights activist named Father James Groppi. He was an Italian man who was a real fighter for human rights. He worked closely with the Milwaukee NAACP. Peggy Rozga marched along with Father Groppi and countless black people. She was also jailed for participating in these freedom marches. Peggy Rozga married Father Groppi and is currently an English professor.

**Where Lawrence Learns the Law
South 50th Street
By Peggy Rozga**

Cops were always parked right
in front of the Freedom House.
Saying there were threats against us.
They had to protect us.
Yeah, they protecting us,
but we the only ones going to jail.
One night, they arrested a girl
for throwing her cigarette on the sidewalk.
We went outside to see what was going on,
they arrested us, too. Took us downtown.
Fingerprinted us. Photographed us.
Yeah, for dropping a cigarette.
So we had to return the favor, right?
Drove out to Chief Breier's house
I'll never forget that address.
We parked in that all-White neighborhood,
sat out there all night. Guarding the Chief of Police.
Hey, there'd been threats against him.
We didn't want anything to happen to him.
Next night we're out there again.
What thanks do we get?
We're arrested
for guarding the chief of police
without a private detective's license.

Anonymous Is Coyote Girl
By Anita Endrezze

From a newspaper photo and article about my godfather, James Moreno, East Los Angeles, 1950.

(Three police officers took a brutal beating in a wild free-for-all with a family, including three young girls.

From left, James, 19, and Alex, 22, in jail after the fracas on the porch of their home at 3307 Hunter.)

Jimmy is staring off the page, hands in his pockets.
A four-button dark shirt. No bruises,
but he looks dazed.

Alex wears a leather coat and a polka-dot shirt,
which is in itself a crime.

Nowhere is there a photo of a young girl
with a face carved like a racetrack saint,
eyes with all bets called off,
grinning like a coyote.

(Officer Parks had his glasses broken
with his own sap
and was thrown through a window.)

Jimmy and Alex are my dad's cousins,
lived on Boyle Heights and tortillas.
Mama says the cops always harassed them, those *niños*
from East L.A., driving their low-riders,
chrome shinier than a cop's badge.
And why wasn't Coyote Girl mentioned, that round-armed
girl with a punch like a bag of bees,
a girl with old eyes, her lips cracking open
as she saw the cop sailing through glass, boiling out
of Boyle Heights, skidding on the sidewalk, flat as a tortilla?

(The officers received severe cuts and bruises,
were treated at a hospital and released in time to jail the youths,
who were charged with assault with a deadly weapon.)

Two years later, I was born and Jimmy entered the church,
hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched, watching the christening.
Four drops of water, like popped-off wafer-thin buttons,
fell on my head.

No.

He never showed up that day
or any other. My spiritual guardian must've been there
in spirit only.

He didn't know *nada* about God and no one knows
where he is today, but I think you could find him at the end
of a knife. Or in the slash of the z
in ¡La Raza! the dark blood
reds of graffiti. Or tomatoes
grown in old coffee cans
by a white-haired man
sitting in the sun in a dark shirt,
next to an old woman growing younger every day
as I tell her story, my story,
our story
with all the grace and power
of a deadly weapon.

Anita Endrezze, "Anonymous is Coyote Girl" from *Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon*. Copyright © 2000 by Anita Endrezze.

Source: *Throwing Fire at the Sun Water at the Moon* (University of Arizona Press, 2000)

4/30/92
For rodney king
By Lucille Clifton

so
the body
of one black man
is rag and stone
is mud
and blood
the body of one
black man
contains no life
worth loving
so the body
of one black man
is nobody
mama
mama
mamacita
is there no value
in this skin
mama
mama
if we are nothing
why
should we spare
the neighborhood
mama
mama
who will be next and
why should we save
the pictures

Elegy
(for MOVE* and Philadelphia)
By Sonia Sanchez

1.
philadelphia
a disgusted southern city
squatting in the eastern pass of
colleges cathedrals and cowboys.
philadelphia, a phalanx of parsons
and auctioneers
modern gladiators
erasing the delirium of death from their shields
while houses burn out of control.

2.
c'mon girl hurry on down to osage st
they're roasting in the fire
smell the dreadlocks and blk/skins
roasting in the fire.

c'mon newsmen and tvmen
hurry on down to osage st and
when you have chloroformed the city
and after you have stitched up your words
hurry on downtown for sanctuary
in taverns and corporations

and the blood is not yet dry.

3.
how does one scream in thunder?

4.
they are combing the morning for shadows
and screams tongue-tied without faces
look, over there, one eye

escaping from its skin
and our heartbeats slowdown to a drawl
and the kingfisher calls out from his downtown capital
and the pinstriped general reenlists
his tongue for combat
and the police come like twin seasons of drought and flood.
they're combing the city for life liberty and
the pursuit of happiness.

5.

how does one city scream in thunder?

6.

hide us O lord
deliver us from our nakedness.
exile us from our laughter
give us this day our rest from seduction
peeling us down to our veins.

and the tower was like no other. amen.
and the streets escaped under the
cover of darkness amen.
and the voices called out from
their wounds amen.
and the fire circumcised the city amen.

7.

who anointeth the city with napalm? (i say)
who giveth this city in holy infanticide?

8.

beyond the mornings and afternoons
and deaths detonating the city.
beyond the tourist roadhouses
trading in lobotomies
there is a glimpse of earth

this prodigal earth.
 beyond edicts and commandments
 commissioned by puritans
there are people navigating the breath of hurricanes.
 beyond concerts and football
 and mummers strutting their
 sequined processional.
there is this earth. this country. this city.
 this people.
collecting skeletons from waiting rooms
 lying in wait. for honor and peace.
 one day.

*MOVE: a Philadelphia based back to nature group whose headquarters was bombed by the police on May 13, 1985, killing men, women, and children. An entire city block was destroyed by fire.

Our Sons

**For the seven – and eight-year old boys wrongly accused
in the murder of eleven-year-old Ryan Harris**

By Quraysh Ali Lansana (father, professor, editor)

the difference between
the truth and a lie

separates a one-inch skull
fracture and a rock
chucked by a seven-year-old.

blue beads grip
his braids, jerking
as he nods in response.

if he grows up
he hopes to join
chicago's finest gang.

they drive fast cars,
carry big guns,
always live on tv.

just a few more questions, ma'am.

the wooden bench
no more comfortable
than it has ever been.

in chicago, justice is
a room with no windows.

her boy, seven, is hungry,
confused. She can feel it
from the muffled hallway.

door cracked. Dark
as frantic shadows.
daddy is not allowed.

to enter the station.
guards hold back
fire. the englewood moon

a pale, knowing bulb.

the boys, low-rent refugees
from third world corners,
bend, then break: confess

over happy meals. They will be
forgotten like quiet bicycles.

The Arrest
By John Grey

Across the street,
I watch as one cop
slaps a kid against a wall,
twists his arm up
behind his back
while the other frisks him.
He's a crook,
I say to myself,
and I suddenly feel safer.
But then I think,
what if he's innocent.
And then none
of us are safe.
I walk away thinking
well as long as I'm innocent
and as long as no one
assumes I'm guilty
then I'm as safe
or as unsafe
as I was
right before I saw this incident.
As the cops drag
their suspect away,
I thank them
for clearing that up for me.

**To the police officer who refused to
sit in the same room as my son because
he's a "gang banger":**

by Luis Rodriguez

How dare you!

How dare you pull this mantle from your sloven
sleeve and think it worthy enough to cover my boy.
How dare you judge when you also wallow in this mud.
Society has turned over its power to you,
relinquishing its rule, turned it over
to the man in the mask, whose face never changes,
always distorts, who does not live where I live,
but commands the corners, who does not have to await
the nightmares, the street chants, the bullets,
the early-morning calls, but looks over at us
and demeans, calls us animals, not worthy
of his presence, and I have to say: How dare you!
My son deserves to live as all young people.
He deserves a future and a job. He deserves
contemplation. I can't turn away as you.
Yet you govern us? Hear my son's talk.
Hear his plea within his pronouncement,
his cry between the breach of his hard words.
My son speaks in two voices, one of a boy,
the other of a man. One is breaking through,
the other just hangs. Listen, you who can turn away,
who can make such a choice; you who have sons
of your own, but do not hear them!
My son has a face too dark, features too foreign,
a tongue too tangled, yet he reveals, he truths,
he sings your demented rage, but he sings.
You have nothing to rage because it is outside of you.
He is inside of me. His horror is mine. I see what
he sees. And if my son dreams, if he plays, if he smirks
in the mist of moon glow, there I will be, smiling
through the blackened, cluttered and snarling pathway
toward our wilted heart.

**Who But The Lord?
By Langston Hughes**

I looked and I saw
That man they call the law.
He was coming
Down the street at me!
I had visions in my head
Of being laid out cold and dead,
Or else murdered
By the third degree.

I said, *O, Lord, if you can,
Save me from that man!*
Don't let him make a pulp out of me!
But the Lord he was not quick.
The law raised up his stick
And beat the living hell
Out of me!

Now, I do not understand
Why God don't protect a man
From police brutality.

Being poor and black,
I've no weapon to strike back
So who but the Lord
Can protect me?