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AMAUD JAMAUL JOHNSON

## So Much for America

I was interrogated via helicopter  
while taking a shortcut through  
a field I was handcuffed leaving  
this post office I was placed in  
a lineup in the middle of the street  
I dress nattily I wear sport jackets  
I use rubbing alcohol to keep  
my sneakers clean My sweat shirts  
with the stitched block letters  
from certain colleges won't stop  
complete strangers from searching  
my crotch I whisper uncontrollably  
I smile when nothing's funny Gun  
at my temple Shit stinging my ear  
Is that a knife in your hand I thought  
protocol was the scruff of your collar  
On the curb On your stomach  
Cheekbone on the hood The smell  
of good wax I'm so aware of my  
body Do you think about your body  
Look at your hands Show me your  
hands I'm returning to Ellison  
I'm surrounded You're surrounded  
But I'm always alone

## Don't Become a Stranger

Walking with my boys or cousins, people would see us coming and move the fuck out the way. What did I care? What mattered, their fear, projected, irradiating my skin. I've known some murderers before they were murderers: some were always angry, most started off with laughs, flashed pink gums when they smiled. I taught this prison workshop. Got back out to the parking lot after the first session and told the chaplain I was done. I couldn't explain how being so comfortable made me so ill, how being locked in a cage with those men was my closest to home. Now people driving Confederate flags around me. My model General Lee from *The Dukes of Hazzard* I carried as a baby, engine of my mouth, humming: *Oh, I wish I was . . . Old times there are not forgotten . . . Look . . . Look . . .* running those plastic wheels across my legs. I'm waiting for my butter burger, these people in full camouflage as their casual clothes. I assume those stains are paint splatter, I know enough not to ask.

## English

Always a drunk white woman  
 trying to acquire the Negro dialect  
 of my body, like picking up a second  
 tongue. And I can see how it starts,  
 complete strangers fingering my son's  
 hair. You know, a semicolon isn't  
 a hard stop, but it's more than a pause.  
 Sometimes a wink. I've learned to love  
 the nervous laughter that sinks  
 into silence like boards, splintering  
 beneath a dance floor. I almost  
 slapped a child over a compliment  
 about my teeth. Think, sex as syntax:  
 new ways to bend a sentence, the body,  
 appositive, a string of dependents,  
 where our double negatives meet.  
 When I couldn't spell words like  
*interrogate, integrate, or prerogative,*  
 I would drop my pencil under the table  
 to look up my classmate's skirt. I'm still  
 waiting to get suspended. Our vice  
 principal, Mrs. Schultz, had a paddle  
 we called Old Yeller. The grip was taped,  
 it had a long, black handle, she had to use  
 both hands when she swung. She was old  
 and cold, the wood was shot full of holes.

## Order of Confusion

No lie: Adams Funeral Service has a drive-through window, and when the Golden Bird first got that plexiglass lazy Suzan, I thought, How futuristic.

The speaker at the check cashing was always broken, so you had to dip your mouth down like drinking from a clogged fountain to name your denominations.

After the church fire, they built a new sanctuary on bingo and catfish and two-piece barbecue dinners. White bread served as a collection plate for the sauce.

The line took so long you carried that smell of pignut wood in your hair home. The Price Barber Shop, that Dale's with the monstrous rotting stucco doughnut on top,

those are our oldest businesses. The Liquor Mart, until some fool lost control of his Cutlass and launched it, was one of the few buildings to survive the riots.

It danced like a lone tooth at the edge of the block. The junior high school won a makeover, it was on TV and everything, an academic version of *Pimp*

*My Ride*. They repoured the courts, repainted: all the walls came out money green. They tried, but no one bothered to keep the grass alive.

## Ahmad Jamal Is an American Jazz Musician/ Amaud Jamaul Is an American Poet from Compton

People stumble over my name.  
 My favorite is Lamont, like Lamont  
 from *Sanford and Son*. A man didn't  
 hear the first vowel, and for two years,  
 with total confidence, called me Odd.  
*Good to see you again, Odd. Strange  
 weather, isn't it, Odd?* I took too much  
 pleasure in it. *You . . . You Big Dummy!*  
 I was sick and had to come home  
 from school. My great-grandmother  
 was visiting from Texas. When  
 the nurse called, Mama Margaret  
 said, *I'm sorry, but nobody lives here  
 by that name.* My mother stopped  
 dating my father, she wasn't really  
 that interested in jazz. Improvisation  
 is also creative spelling. You know how  
 Black folks are. But I think she thought  
 anything would be better than Craig.

## Possum Dead

*for James Byrd*

How these young white boys  
keep smiling at me, but not  
saying anything, as if a Byrd  
is curled beneath their tongue.

\*

I caught my twelve-year-old  
staring out our front window  
at the neighbors. *What's on your  
mind*, I asked him. *Betrayal*.

\*

The word *Jasper* means "speckled"  
or "spotted rock." A rainbow,  
a heliotrope, the stone of Babylon,  
which traces back to Africa.

\*

The deceased's family doesn't  
believe in the death penalty.  
Friends said death isn't enough,  
eye for an eye, feet, legs, hands.

\*

To humanize him, the defense  
argues Mr. King was gang-raped  
repeatedly by Black men in prison  
when he was only fifteen.

\*

The evidence: a button, a long  
bloody chain, his cap. Of course,  
a man in pieces, a lighter, one side  
engraved “KKK,” the other, “Possum.”

\*

Because of vandals, they had to build  
a fence around the gravesite, padlock  
the front doors of the church.  
All these new ways people get hurt.

\*

Those poems by white women  
in the 1980s about violence, cruelty.  
I don’t get catcalled, but men lean  
out windows, trying to guess my name.

\*

I keep telling myself: They’re gonna  
get you because you are alone, Amaud:  
Gonna get you because you’re too old,  
because you’re too far from home.

\*

But how can we defend ourselves  
from our children and grandchildren?  
How old was Dylann Roof, or the boy  
in Louisiana, all those church burnings?

\*

Maybe my grandparents were run  
out of Texas, but they stayed country.  
And they ended up raising their family  
in the murder capital of the world.