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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attempt, black men, trayvon martin, slow, die, child, poem, death, unkillable, fact, media, story, man, crime, own demise, police, circulating, drug addict, michael brown's, social ills

00:06

I'm Tracy K. Smith, and this is the slow down.

00:23

Do we have control over the stories of our own lives? We make choices. We react to events and circumstances, but other matters set outside of our control.

00:37

What about the stories of our deaths?

00:40

What say do we have in the narrative that will one day be put forward about how we died? And why? It's a question we don't often think to ask. But certain public deaths, like those of Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown, to name only to make plain the fact that certain factors, like media spin or unrelated information, can powerfully manipulate the story of who a person was, and what role they played in their own demise. Do you remember how the fact that Trayvon Martin had been suspended from school was used to suggest he wasn't a good kid? I suppose the larger intention behind circulating a story like that was to suggest that one way or another, he brought his death upon himself. And how about the suggestion that marijuana was detected in Michael Brown's toxicology report, was that an attempt to defend the use of deadly force against him? This vilification of the dead is one way of attempting to argue for the innocence of their killers. Perhaps it is also a way of assassinating the characters of whole communities of people, people whose rights and whose very presence in certain American spaces remain contested. I believe these

attempts to make the victim into the guilty party are also a way of covering up for glaring social ills, like bias, suspicion, and prejudice. Have you ever seen the highway billboards advertising the faces of men, often black men sought by police for a crime? The message they send us is that we need to be on alert for perpetrators who fit this simple profile, black and male. But what does this conditioning do to the mind and spirit of our nation? What does it do to the mind and spirit of this nation's black men? And what preemptive work does it do to prepare us for news of the next black man to die at the hands of police? These are some of the thoughts and questions I made to consider when I read today's poem by dawn Lundy, Martin. They will tell you that I was sick, that I was a drug addict. They will tell you I died a natural death. Sometimes young people just die. They will say we don't know why. They will say I was lazy, that I could not work because of disease and just general feebleness. When a crime is committed by a white man, they will show you a photo of me instead and call me a trickster. In the photo, my jaw is Slack, my hair wild, they will say that I am unkillable, that my body resists battery by tree trunks, bullets and years in small cells. When I enter a store to buy something, I will be immediately arrested and then they will apologize. I am just a child, I will say impossible to be so greasy. And a child they will say there are no children anymore. Why are you so sad? They will ask me. Why is your heart so weak? We've given you everything they say? Why won't you flourish? The slow down is a production of American public media in partnership with the Poetry Foundation. To get a poem delivered to you daily, go to slowdownshow.org and sign up for our newsletter.