

New Poetry by Maurice Decaul



U S Grant on the Disbanding of the Iraqi Army

I heard thunder in the mountains
witnessed soft amber lightening in the clouds
saw in the saplings, & yearling whitetail, promise.

When I reached out to take Lee's hand
to shake, I noticed also, the newness of his uniform
recognized that my own had been caked by
mud & dirt from my ride, & knew then
those questions which had kept me awake
the awful headaches which
overtook me, were for naught.

We had achieved our grand strategy
while in Richmond, the opponent was mired in tactics.

Magnanimity & benevolence being
my best & softest weapons
I applied them aggressively & fed
those desperate men, twenty-five-thousand
meals. I pardoned them & let them keep
hold of their horses therefore denying
them any excuse to develop into a resistance.

This I did in prudence
not wanting to ask the great General to surrender
instead providing him a means
to retire his army from the battlefield, with dignity.

Blue Ridges

Virginia moon, like a wet breast of an old lover
firm like an unripe doughnut peach, has been playing
hide & come find me with clouds & shadows.
On the night highway, road signs like
men in robes, guard rails like teeth or head stones
deer with their headlights look, stand poised
& ready for martyrdom.
Rain clouds blacken the sky; after it rains, Sairan
give the mountains their name. A blue heron lifts its wings.
Southern faces carry confederate residue
like a disaster or a nude woman, I stare.
When is a plantation no longer a plantation?
On the lake shore, with nutria, turtles, brown recluse
& copperheads, I know, I know these waters.
The small voice in my head says leap
it says, these waters will mask your smell.
How will I live here, in the south?
When my belly warns me, be home by dark.

Charlottesville

A woman sits next to me on the bus
I have nothing to say so I look out the window

& I think, if this was a generation ago

& I chose to ignore or respond to this lady's
entreaties, I might've become like strange fruit
ripening in a southern summer.

I want to throw up.

A brochure reminds those of us unfamiliar
in its quaint, elegant way, that "you" are now
in the rural south where respect & gentility...

I hope this woman doesn't expect a toothy smile
or a chortle, or that I will step off the sidewalk
or keep on listening to her go on & on.

Aleluya

Flocks of birds, explode like atoms;
cottontails, in coyote scat.

Climate

In the market, we look past each other
even as we both reach for strawberries
Excuse, me.
, excuse me.

*

I have a habit of biting my nails.
I fear being bitten by water moccasins.
I dread country roads during new moons.
Last night, I mistook, the whitetail, for spirits.

*

During afternoon rumbling
wind shouting through fractures in stone
like an invocation from the dead
for hemlocks to sacrifice their branches.

*

Slaves' tears fall from heaven, floods
our plantation, loosens clay, rounds out pebbles.

Photo Credit: Matthew Brady

It's All So Familiar; It's All So Heartbreaking

Today, November 24th, 2015, Jason Van Dyke was charged with  first-degree murder in the slaying of Laquan McDonald in

Chicago, Illinois. We all should be charged for the same thing. I won't argue with anyone who wants to call Jason Van Dyke a bad apple, but the problem is larger than that.

The problem—the problem that led to the death of Laquan McDonald—extends to Jason Van Dyke's police department, whose officers allegedly went into a Burger King and erased the surveillance video. It extends to the Mayor's office and to the State's Attorney's office, who were dilatory in bringing charges. It extends to our legislatures who have shielded our law enforcement officers with cloaks of qualified immunity, impunity, and legal invincibility. It extends to our courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court, for eviscerating the Fourth Amendment rights of the citizens.

The problem extends to each and every single one of us who wants to claim citizenship in a democratic republic.

Laquan McDonald is on all of us.

We are a society. We have a culture. We share a nation. We call ourselves the *United States of America*. We pride ourselves on our democratic ideals. We claim exceptionalism. Equal protection under the laws. A government of the people and by the people. Just as we as a nation cannot absolve ourselves for the slaughter of innocents overseas when we send our troops to war, we can't abdicate our own responsibility for the death of Laquan McDonald or any of the others unjustly harassed, abused, or murdered in our name.

All it takes to file criminal charges in this country is probable cause, a bar so low in our courts that if it were not so tragic it would be laughable. It took over a year to charge Jason Van Dyke with first-degree murder despite the fact that clear video evidence showed far more than probable cause that he committed first-degree murder when he opened fire on a juvenile, a teenager who was moving away from him, a kid who made no threatening gestures toward Jason Van Dyke. He opened

fire and he kept firing. Laquan McDonald fell to the ground and Jason Van Dyke kept firing.

It was memorialized in video. Evidence exists. Probable cause exists. As a society, we should be expected to seek justice for whomever was responsible for the death of Laquan McDonald. But we didn't. We delayed, and justice delayed is justice denied.

It took 400 days to charge Van Dyke in the shooting of Laquan McDonald.

Jason Van Dyke gunned down Laquan McDonald on October 20th, 2014. A judge, in response to a journalist's Freedom of Information Act request, ordered the video of the shooting released to the public by November 25th, 2015. 400 days.

400 days have gone by since Laquan McDonald breathed his last while he lay bleeding in the streets from sixteen bullet holes, with all the bullets being fired by one sworn to *uphold* the law and *protect* and *serve* the public.

400 days. The State's Attorney, she's an elected official. She's a politician. The video had been requested by the public for a year. When the courts finally forced the city to release the video of the slaying as unrest continued to grow, she waited until the day the video was released to press charges.

#BlackLivesMatter –Laquan McDonald's life mattered.

If Laquan McDonald had been arrested for shooting and killing someone, if the roles were reversed, he would have been put in jail and charged as soon as the courts were open for business. He would have been denied bail. He would have been assigned to an overworked public defender who could not possibly be expected to provide effective assistance of counsel with the immorally low funding and staffing in the public defender's office. Laquan McDonald would either be coerced into pleading or he would have a mere formality of a trial before he was

sent to prison or death row. No one would blink, because that is how our country operates. That is the status quo.

Instead, Jason Van Dyke is a white police officer who has a thin blue line to erase video tapes for him. He is a white police officer who has the strongest unions and political lobbies behind him. He is a white police officer who works in the executive branch of our government, hand in hand with the attorneys responsible for charging decisions and prosecutions. He is a white police officer who has 400 days to prepare a defense, to prepare his family, to practice those magic words, "I feared for my life." He is a white police officer who may have never been charged in the first place if a journalist didn't fight for that video to be released, who may have never been charged had that video not forced the hand of the State's Attorney in her own self-interested political game.

We are all complicit; we are all responsible for change.

Plenty of people will spill words indicting Jason Van Dyke, but plenty of right-wing racists will instead blame the victim and say that if Laquan McDonald weren't a "thug," if he had just followed the directions of police, if he had just not committed any crimes in the first place, he would still be alive. Their logic will rest on the idea that anything short of unflinching obedience to the State, anything short of complete purity of spirit (and skin) deserves the sentence of death with no trial.

Plenty of people will blame a police culture that encourages officers to shoot first and ask questions later, yet plenty of others will write op-eds about a non-existent war on police.

Plenty of people will march in Laquan McDonald's memory to honor him and to protest the sad truth that our government—and thus, the majority of our citizenry—cares less for the lives of black people and other people of color than it does for the white majority, yet many will point to the red herring of

black on black violence.

Plenty of people will scream out in anguish because they aren't heard when they say, "Black lives matter," but—sadly—plenty of people will scream out in anger and denial to drown them out. Plenty of people will miss the point entirely; and to protect their own fragile psyches, to continue living in denial, or to maintain their own status quo, they will cry out, "All lives matter."

It's all so familiar, and it's all so heartbreaking. So many words will be spilled about the blood we continue to spill, and most of them will be pointing the finger at someone else. So few will hold up a mirror and say, "How am I complicit?" The truth is, we are all to blame.

We live in a culture of fear in which we demonize "the other." We live in a culture of violence in which we use guns in misguided efforts to solve or prevent our problems. We live in a culture in which we are at war with each other—black lives vs. blue lives, liberals vs. conservatives, extremist evangelicals vs. everyone, and the list goes on.

We live in a culture in which we voice outrage over the blood spilled in our streets, in our movie theaters, and in our schools; yet, we do nothing about it. We live in a culture in which we are all given one vote, we are all given voices, and we continue to either not use them or we waste them to maintain the status quo. The status quo is not acceptable.

My heart absolutely breaks for Laquan McDonald and for his family. And my heart breaks for us all.

Matthew J. Hefti is the author
✘ of [*A Hard and Heavy Thing*](#) (Tyurus
/ F+W).

The Importance of Identity

Letter to US #2: It's Up to You

✘

Dear NRA Members, 2nd Amendment lovers, Fraternal Order of Police members, legislators, judges, voters, prosecutors, federal agents, state agents, municipal agents, county sheriffs, veterans of foreign wars, and anyone else who gives even a scintilla of a-

Pardon me. Let me start over. This needs to be bigger than that. This needs to be more inclusive than that. This needs to look at US all as a unit, the idea being that we're all in this together. To that end-

Dear US:

I have a few things to say. First things first: This piece is not reporting. It is not an academic treatise. It is not a thoughtfully-crafted essay. It is—plain and simple—a rant. I intend to do the time-consuming work that needs to be done to create a well-researched and well-crafted essay, but I feel this cannot wait for all of that. I need to address it now. So feel free to focus on inconsequential details when tearing this apart, but I'm telling you up front I don't purport this to be anything but an angry rant by a crusty vet, written in haste in the middle of the night. I guess it's also something of a proposal or a call to action, because I do not believe we are doomed.

The impetus: Two "independent experts" (I'm skeptical of both their independence and their expertise) determined that Tim Loehmann—rookie cop with the twitchy trigger finger in Cleveland—and Frank Garback—veteran cop who has seen *Ronin* one too many times—were perfectly justified in screaming to a stop mere feet from a little boy, jumping out without hesitation, and opening fire to assassinate the child before they even had time to shout out a warning.

Their excuse? They couldn't know if the gun was real. They feared for their lives.

This is not meant to pillory Tim Loehmann or Frank Garback; I'm sure there will be plenty of words thrown around the internet doing that dirty work. I would also bet that they were trained poorly and molded and raised in a toxic culture. I have no doubt they too are products of their systems, and they likely aren't "bad apples"—unless you want to label the entire department bad apples, which might actually be defensible, but it doesn't make them outliers.

I want to address the fact that this is a systemic problem, i.e., a broken system creates the problem. And I want to go

larger; like, who's in charge here, anyway? Because someone made the system. The government made the system. Well, who made the government?

The death of Tamir Rice is my fault. And it's your fault. It's the fault of all of us in the US. You see, the people make the government. We allowed it to happen, and we continue to allow it to happen. We allowed the courts to eviscerate our Constitutional rights against unreasonable searches and seizures and our due process rights protecting our lives and property. A shooting is a seizure. And a police shooting is the State taking a life without affording the victim due process of law. Then, when our courts slowly eroded any protections we had against police power, we did nothing about it. We stood by and we failed to lobby our legislators to fix what the courts continue to get wrong. We're generally apathetic. If we're not apathetic when it comes to protecting our own rights as citizens, we're certainly not effective.

With so many people acting as stakeholders in this problem—with so many of us at fault—I could write specific questions for all of US to inquire as to what this interest group or that interest group will do to change it. But we have to start big. This can't wait. Too many young black men are dying; and with every prosecutor that fails to bring an indictment, with every jury that acquits, and with every judge bound to follow bad precedent, the police have more power and more leeway to pull the trigger whenever they fancy, without fear of consequence.

(As an aside, I don't know why any legitimately responsible police officer would be afraid to do their jobs due to the YouTube effect. We can have people saying they can't breathe, dying at the hands of police on the side of the street for selling loosies; we can have young boys, not even old enough to shave, getting blasted at the playground without warning; and we can have mentally ill person after mentally ill person call the police for help only to have the police shoot and

kill him when they finally arrive—we can have all that and indictments still don't come down from the people claiming to be able to indict ham sandwiches. So I really can't understand when police claim they are scared to do their jobs because of what might happen to them if they have a violent encounter. Police have the most powerful unions and lobbyists in the country, they have the prosecutors in their corner, and the courts have given them free reign; police have nothing to fear if they are defecating on the law they're sworn to uphold, so they certainly have nothing to fear when they do their job responsibly.)

If you slept through high school civics, let me explain that no one can stop disaster on slippery slopes created by judges except legislators. Which means no one can stop disaster on slippery slopes except voters. Except we all know that's not true, because voters have about as much power to change our course as a sailboat in outer space. The only thing that talks in this country is money, especially after *Citizens United*. And the only people that legislators will even give the time of day are wealthy lobbyists. But that too can change.

As voters we can stop anything we want to stop. We can fix anything we want to fix. We can change the entire course of the country in a single election day if we'd just set aside our apathy and cynicism for a single day. But in order for that to happen, we need a little imagination. We need to recognize that things are not OK. We need to have faith that things can improve, because without that faith nothing will.

We have a problem. We get the police we deserve, and the police we have shoot people with impunity.

So let's go there. Let me ask a serious question of US—all of us; i.e., those of us with the NRA stickers on our big trucks; the quiet and responsible families who fill their freezer with their hunted game; the loudmouth, abrasive, foolish, and willfully-ignorant open-carry demonstrators; the picketers,

protestors, and pot-smokers; the hobbyists and lobbyists; both the city-dwellers and participants in the great white flight; those still stuck in urban centers and impoverished minorities in in the rural south who must make herculean efforts to cast a ballot; the gun show organizers, sellers, and attendees; the veterans who like to go to the range to blow off some steam and remember the good ol' days; the veterans who never want to touch a gun again; the hippie liberals who want to gut the right to bear arms like a cleanly shot buck; and all the people who love to defend the modern courts' interpretation of the 2nd Amendment:

What are we going to do about it?

And not just, "What are we going to do about Tamir Rice?" But what are we going to do about Jason Harrison, James Boyd, John Crawford III, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, Walter Scott, and a multitude more whose names don't make the national headlines? What are we going to do about police officers—of any race—having the power to shoot anyone they please with impunity, simply by reciting the magic words: "I feared for my life" and then hiding behind their union and their case law written by either elected or politically appointed judges?

What are we going to do about the *systemic* problem?

Does it not scare the ever-living hell out of you that a police officer can ambush you with gunfire, killing you dead, and then walk away with nary a scratch or a reprimand, simply because he saw what he believed to be a gun?

I need everyone to focus—particularly you Second Amendment people, because you can't ignore this one. This one directly implicates your beloved practices, e.g., lawful behavior, open-carry.

I need all of US to stretch our imaginations.

These are all imperatives: White people, don't get reflexively

defensive because you get uncomfortable when people point out the very real and very damaging white privilege we enjoy. Those who cry “race baiting,” don’t get reflexively defensive because people point out our country’s sordid history of racism and apartheid. Police, conservatives, and closet racists, don’t get reflexively defensive when people say that black lives matter—because guess what; they do. They matter. Instead of getting defensive and becoming willfully-ignorant to the plight of others, I truly think we can make a difference to show that black lives matter, to show that we can’t tolerate this kind of policing.

White people, I want you to imagine this. (People of color don’t need to imagine it; it’s a real fear they live with every day.) White people, I want you to really try to bring that brain of yours to the next imaginative level. Imagine this plausible scenario of a young white child, roughly the same age as Tamir Rice when he was gunned down by agents of his government. (Well, the scenario is plausible up until the end; spoiler alert: white kids don’t have to fear getting shot up by the police in the neighborhood park.)

Now Visualize.

You buy your son a pellet gun for his 12th birthday. Not even into high school yet, but he’s responsible, and he needs to learn how to use his weapon wisely and safely. You take him out to the woods and you two plunk away at squirrels, and it’s great bonding time. One day your son asks if he can go out himself and look for some grouse or rabbits or something. You say sure, because you trust him. He’s your son, and besides being a sweet kid, he’s pretty mature for his age.

So he walks into the woods from the park in your town, and he goes and legally hunts some small game, and he learns the beauty of the woods. He communes with nature, just as you taught him. After an hour or two, he emerges from the tree line. He strolls across an open field, making a beeline back

to your shared home, which is not far from the park and the woods.

He is carrying his weapon, which is real, unloaded, and perfectly legal. You see, in Cleveland, where you live, it is legal to open-carry weapons, even handguns.

(As a side note, that's even more proof that you Second Amendment people have real clout in our political machinery, clout which could be put to good use—good use like changing police use-of-force laws. Until the Second Amendment people wielded their clout, Cleveland *did* have an open-carry ban until 2010, but the Republican legislature—supported and lobbied by none other than the NRA—usurped the home rule authority of municipal governments and decreed that the open carrying of weapons in the middle of the city was a matter of statewide concern that warranted legislation to allow open carry in all cities. The state legislators effectively prohibited municipalities from drafting and enforcing their own ordinances banning the open carrying of deadly weapons. So for, like, the past five years or something, everyone in Cleveland, indeed everyone in Ohio, has been operating under some of the most liberal open-carry laws in the country. Now before conservatives get confused, liberal in this context means permissive. In Ohio, not only is it legal to open carry long guns, it is legal to open carry handguns, and it has been legal for five years—more like nine, but of course there was litigation—which means Loehmann and Garback should have known that. And if they didn't know that, they should have. The Cleveland Chief of Police put out a memo to his entire division just last year to make sure his police knew that they could not detain individuals for open carrying, ensuring that it was crystal clear to his police officers that open carrying a weapon—even if it caused alarm to others—was legal activity that could not even support a charge of disorderly conduct.)

Your son though—he's daydreaming. He's thinking of how basketball season is just around the corner. He can actually

smell the leaves changing color, and he gets this crazy feeling in his stomach when he thinks of the rut, which will be here in no time at all.

Your son, the kid you take hunting and fishing, the kid whose games you go to, the one whose diapers you changed, the one you want to inherit the world from you: well, he has his head so far in the clouds that he doesn't even see the cop car that peels around the corner at a rate of speed much higher than twenty-five miles per hour. Your boy is kicking rocks on the ground when he finally looks up. By now, the cop car is so close to him, he flinches because he doesn't know if this car will run him over or not. He sees his short life flash before his eyes.

But then he can breathe. He will live after all. He relaxes when the car stops in time. He exhales and is about to give a sheepish wave to the police officer stepping out of the car. But then his head cocks to the side just a little bit. The breeze catches his dirty blond hair, and the golden strands flutter. Your son suddenly feels as if he has been punched, but he doesn't know why. He doesn't even feel the second punch, because he is dead. He has been shot three times by police before he even knew that they were there for him.

I know it's hard to imagine. It's hard for me to imagine as well. It's hard for me to imagine not because I lack empathy and not because I can't appreciate the pain of others, but because I don't believe that the parents of little white boys and girls have to worry about anything like that in any city in America. But parents of black children do have to worry about that.

Forget your politics for, like, a solid minute. If you could please, *please* put your twelve-year-old self into a park in Cleveland, and look at the world through the eyes of Tamir Rice or someone *just like him*.

A beautiful autumn day, rosy cheeks after a trek in the woods, the excitement of a good hunt, the casual carry of a perfectly legal item, and your son lies on the pavement of the park, his blood running out of his body. The police don't help him. Though a child who has been shot three times and is on the ground dead or dying poses no threat, they render no aid.

Your daughter—your oldest—she sees from the corner where she was talking to a friend. She tries running to help your son. Her blond ponytail whips back and forth as she runs to help her brother. But the police grab her. They won't let her near your son, though his blood soaks into the ground.

So doesn't that terrify you? I mean the courts have spoken, but *you, you* are reasonable, right? Do you think it is reasonable that police can just run around shooting law-abiding citizens and then simply hide behind the claim that they saw a gun while chanting the sacred police mantra, *I feared for my life?*

If you don't think it's reasonable—and *I* most certainly do not think our current police use-of-force laws are anywhere near reasonable—then you must do something about it. No one can do it for US, we have to do it ourselves.

This isn't about Loehmann or Garmback. This is about an entire society, an entire society that places little value on life and even less value on black or brown life.

Focus one last time. Imagine the image of your son, head cocked, blond hair caught in the wind, embarrassed and sheepish look on his face. Imagine a split-second shift in his eyebrows. He now looks confused. Imagine his hair soaking up the blood that's pooling under his body.

Now imagine you are now yourself again, but with this new knowledge of the world that you hadn't imagined before. You can't forget this image—this image of your son dying, dead. Yet in your life that no one ever talks about in the news, you

as a parent get to see expert after expert talk about the men who assassinated your son; you get to hear them prattle on about how justified those men were. You get to hear how absolutely reasonably those men were acting when they drove a two-thousand-pound car within feet of your young son before shooting him dead within two seconds. After all, they saw a gun. They feared for their lives.

Isn't it just maddening?

I think it is. And we're the only ones who can do anything about it.

I'm out.

-MJH

P.S. You'll be hearing more from me on this. I guarantee it.

Why Black Literature Matters

✘ “The Thankful Poor”, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1894

Last month in *The Atlantic*, Egyptian writer and activist Alaa Al Aswany wrote an excellent essay on [How Literature Inspires Empathy](#). He gives an example from a sentence in Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* (“He, also, had a mother”) to show how a single word makes the reader see a criminal and prisoner in a whole new light. As Al Aswany explains, “the role of literature is in this ‘also’. It means we're going to understand, we're going to forgive, we're not going to judge. We should understand that people are not bad, but they can do bad things under particular circumstances.” Later, after mentioning how *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* help us

sympathize with and not judge those titular unfaithful wives, he writes "Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities. It teaches us how to feel other people suffering. When you read a good novel, you forget about the nationality of the character. You forget about his or her religion. You forget about his skin color or her skin color. You only understand the human. You understand that this is a human being, the same way we are. And so reading great novels absolutely can remake us as much better human beings." There is a case to be made that Dostoyevsky is not an author who always inspires much empathy in his readers (especially when compared to his counterpart Tolstoy). Likewise, it is impossible to claim that reading literature always improves the reader, which is just not the case.

My main interests of study and research have always been history, philosophy, and literature. I have two degrees in history, which helps me learn about and understand the world. Philosophy helps me think about the world, sometimes too abstractly, as it is and ought to be. But literature is a way of feeling, understanding, and connecting with humanity in all its various guises on a personal and emotional level. It is a continuation of the oldest human activity of storytelling. I would argue that not only is literature at least as important as the other arts and sciences, including history and philosophy, but, at its best, it is one of the central things that symbolizes our shared humanity and, in the process of both absorbing old and creating new literature, shapes us as human creatures.

One reason for this is that, despite some self-appointed guardians of what constitutes high culture (or snobbish protectors of an exclusive and immutable "canon"), literature is and always has been primarily a form of popular entertainment appealing to people from all walks of life. We think of Shakespeare, rightly, as an almost godlike literary creator central to Western literature; in reality, a large

part of his plays just barely survived in written form only through the foresight of two contemporaries who produced the Folios. If not for this, Shakespeare might today be known only to scholars as an Elizabethan playwright whose enormous popularity was due mostly to the lower and middle classes enjoying his over-abundance of wittily crude sexual jokes and double entendres.

According to my own rough formulation, all literature can probably be grouped into two categories based on the motives of both author and reader: escapism, and edification. Most genre literature falls under escapism—fantasy, science fiction, mystery, thriller, historical fiction, romance, western, travel, etc. The somewhat smaller range of books that intend to represent broad universal truths, dig into a particular philosophical discourse, or teach some important life lesson to the readers about the world fall under the category of edification—these are usually the “classics” that are reread by every generation of reader. It is important to note that there is overlap between the two categories; that is, every type of escapist “genre” literature has its own exemplars of great literature due to the skill and depth of the writing. Tolkien is considered the greatest of the fantasy writers, and his work transcends that genre and becomes something valuable and worthy for all readers (I don’t know if the Harry Potter series can be seen the same way since I have never read it; readers can let me know in the comments section). Similarly in science fiction, Asimov is one of the writers who pushed the boundaries of his genre into something greater and more universal. Most of Jane Austen’s novels are basically simple romance (just like all Shakespeare’s comedies), but that does not mean they are not also edifying literature in some capacity. I do not intend to attempt any wider comparisons on this theme of two types of literature, but I would be interested to read about other examples that come to mind (once again, you can let me know in the comments section).

Coming broadly around from this digression to my main point, literature can do many things, and one of the most important of these, to my mind, is to inspire empathy—something which has never been overly abundant in the world but which there can never be too much of. Because of the unique merits of literature, it has a power to reach people on a raw or emotional level that is rare in other media. In the most extreme end of the spectrum, it can cause readers to be so affected as to kill themselves in droves, as with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It can convey the feeling of shared humanity, such as Prince Andrei felt while mortally wounded on the field of Borodino in *War and Peace*. It can make us understand the lives of people who are totally different from us, and who we would otherwise never know anything about. This is especially true of the books by people who in the past were never represented in literature due to political and social circumstances—slavery, colonialism, poverty, and other exploitations. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is considered the first important modern novel by an African writer, which shows the African rather than the European perspective of a Joseph Conrad or a Graham Greene. A similar example is the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, which describe the hardships of colonial Kenyan life and the Mau Mau rebellion in a much different way than the more idealized European vision of a Karen Blixen.

A writer does not have to be one of the excluded minorities or oppressed in order to write about them. Alan Paton was a white liberal South African who worked for penal reform in his country and founded the South African Liberal Party (which was outlawed by the Apartheid regime). His book *Cry, the Beloved Country* tells the story of a poor Zulu priest who makes a Dantean journey to Johannesburg to look for his missing sister and son. It is one of the most emotionally charged books I have read, and a book that cannot fail to create a strong sense of empathy in the reader for the injustices of racism in

South Africa (and, by extension, the whole world).

“Black Lives Matter” is a new civil rights movement for Black people in America after the seemingly endless cases of police murder and injustice that have recently proven the existence and depth of entrenched systemic racism in the America of the First Black President. The reactionaries and enablers of injustice that have decried this movement say that it foments violence (it does not) or disregard for White people’s lives (it does not). Despite the unique promise of its founding, America is a country whose relatively short history has had more than its share of horrific and unforgettable injustice. After decades or even centuries of hard-fought activism slowly bending the arc of history towards justice, much of the past has indeed been forgotten or misrepresented. In school textbooks, I fear that much of the true history is at least partially white-washed, if not completely elided. The two grossest examples are the 400-year genocide of the Native Americans, and the 300-year terror regime of Black slavery. Both of these things allowed the United States to grow into the wealthy and powerful country it is today, and the latter’s influence on the society and politics of 21st century America is still quite strong and cannot be forgotten, diminished, or excused. For every romantic apology for the South (such as the novel and film *Gone With the Wind*) or for every apologist who claims that slavery was “not so bad” for the slaves, there must be someone who refutes them immediately with the truth. If someone claims that things are fine for Black people now because of the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action, they need to understand that such relatively feeble legislation has barely put a dent in the centuries of heart-breaking brutality and relentless economic exploitation.

Luckily, there is a strong recent tradition in America of Black literature which tells stories that could never have been told even 100 years ago. For anyone doubting that White

privilege is real or that Black Lives have not mattered as much as White Lives in America, I would recommend some of these books more than any history book. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I was thinking mostly of fiction—novels, specifically—as the focus of this piece, but there are numerous examples of literary non-fiction—especially autobiographies—that are worth reading and have lessons to teach: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. More than the superficiality of film and the flatness of art and photography, the depth of characterization, psychology, tragedy, and emotion contained in such literature can do more to create awareness of the joy and tragedy of human lives and inspire deep and long-lasting empathy for other people.

In Al Aswany's article, he comments that "I don't think literature is the right tool to change the situation right now. If you would like to change the situation now, go out into the street. Literature, to me, is about a more important change: It changes our vision, our understanding, the way we see. And people who are changed by literature, in turn, will be more capable to change the situation." There is often a strong connection between writers and political activism, which has been especially clear in the case of writers coming from traditionally suppressed minority backgrounds; James Baldwin was a lifelong fighter for social and racial justice, and Alice Walker famously declared that "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

In a time when Liberal Arts and humanistic studies are coming under criticism for not being apparently linked to "real-world" skills, and budgets for education are being cut across the board, we need to ask ourselves if there are things

important in society beyond profit-making. Is nation-building and money-making the most important thing in society, more than the lives of people it exploits? Are some people in society just a means for others and not an end in themselves? How can we enrich our culture and society to be not only good citizens but empathetic fellow humans? Reading literature is no panacea, but is certainly something that can do no harm. Only in such a world where we understand and feel compassion for people outside our own circle can a statement such as Black Lives Matter be both a true assertion and a reality. Where kids and teenagers are not murdered by the police for no reason other than that they were Black, where refugees and immigrants would be universally welcomed rather than treated like lower life forms. Only in a more empathetic world of shared humanity is this possible.

Letters to Us: #1. May All Those Who Labor Find Rest

2015.09.06, Labor Day

Dear America,

You inspire me into a coma.