

New Poetry by Maggie Harrison: "Clutch and Bless"




MY RASPBERRY HEART / *image by Amalie Flynn*

CLUTCH AND BLESS

my heart is a raspberry
juicy yet taut
fragile
temporal
eat it now
before it degrades and
leaves a tasteless
piece
of itself
smeared on the basket.
my raspberry heart lives in the moment
but not my gut
my gut dreams
unpredictable
digesting whatever latest bout
I've consumed
pandemic fear
fear of white supremacists

indignation
incarceration
playacting colonization with real guns on the
range
a night in jail to protest police violence
hope for change
the audacity to hold it
all of this roils
my gut
terribly
tangled in the past
it's what I ate yesterday and am now
transforming
to expel in the future
my raspberry, my beating heart
crush it, suck it through your teeth, and savor

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 Racist Arguments For, Against Gun Control

Gun violence is deeply entrenched in America. Chances are, if you've spent any time outside the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the last 30 years, you've been touched by gun violence personally—someone you've met or know personally has been hurt or killed by guns. It's a problem that affects us all.

It's also a complicated problem, in the sense that the two groups of people who are most enthusiastic about the issue are the ones making certain that nothing happens to change the status quo. On the one hand, you have on the right the numerous NRA-member, 2nd Amendment-quoting survivalists, who think that far from the US needing gun control, what the US needs is more guns, everywhere. These people are dangerous. On the other hand, you have a smaller but equally vocal group of people on the left—the precious, very-well educated shop-at-Whole-Foods-for-their-vainglorious-illness types—who think that the only people who should have guns are the police and the military. These people are dangerous.

And both groups may be racist.

The 2nd Amendment, which provides for a “well regulated militia” was written with several things in mind. One was an organic, community-level response to attacks by hostile states and nations. Another was attacks on colonists at the peripheries of U.S. territories by Native Americans (then called “Indians” or “Natives”) who often disputed settlements (for understandable reasons). Another was the prospect of a tyrannical government arising in America itself—a guarantee provided to each State against the possibility of a large entity destroying the small, at a time when that seemed more plausible and immediate than it does today.

One of the most important considerations at the time, well documented in other publications, was the fear that slaves would gain access to guns, enabling them to organize a rebellion. As time went on, this concern diminished in the North (where they did away with slavery and indentured servitude in favor of more benign methods of employment, such as wage slavery and the systematic exploitation of immigrants in factories). Meanwhile, demographics made the problem (from the politically-dominant White population's perspective) much more immediate in the South. There's a fairly convincing argument to be made that the tradition and legacy of gun ownership in the South is tied directly to fear of a massive racial uprising.

So when the NRA people say they want guns to protect themselves, they're saying they want guns so they can *feel safe*. The legacy of that feeling of safety in the South is tied directly to slavery, and the worry that a large group of angry black people—dslaves, or, in today's parlance, former slaves / criminals / thugs—would come after white people. The only way to protect oneself from that fear—the only way to be *safe*, according to this way of thinking—is to own guns.

On the extreme of the progressive position, the urban, largely northern “nobody should have guns except the military and the police” advocates of gun control, racism is more benign, but based on the realities of life-as-it-is, undeniably present. This group, typified by intellectuals like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik are operating on the same basic assumptions as their southern and Midwestern countrymen—they want to be *safe*—and the best way to be safe from gun violence, according to this small but vocal group, is to take all the guns off the street, absolutely prohibit them from personal use, and only permit them to the military and police.

While the military is about as white as the population – the combat branches, officers (the leaders and the ones with the guns, so to speak), and senior officers are disproportionately

white. Most of the police are white, also disproportionately so given the populations they patrol. So when the extreme left says “the guns should be in the hands of the police and military,” actually what they’re saying—whether they’re conscious of this or not—is that they feel *safe* with the military and police they have, and that those people should have guns. That is, they feel *safe* when the people in authority have guns, as long as the people in authority are just like them.



On the other hand, while there are black advocates of better gun control, their idea of gun control rarely includes a more perfectly-armed police force and military. Their idea is—like that of most of the left, many moderates, and centrists on the right—simply that guns should be more difficult to procure, to keep them out of the hands of mentally unstable or those with criminal tendencies. It’s difficult to imagine a less objectionable idea: guns are available and restricted like cars, with various permutations to handle different types of weapons.

In summary, citizens who believe that nobody should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who believe that everyone should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who maintain that while it should be more difficult to have guns, law-abiding, mentally sound tax-payers in the United States of America should have access to them do not exhibit any explicit or implicit racial biases, at least when it comes to this issue.

Against Obvious Racism

Let's be honest about racism. It's here. And it's not going anywhere. But its prevalence is surprising, again, if we're being honest: we've been under the mistaken impression, for some time, now, outside the ghetto, outside poverty-stricken areas and urban centers (I'm using white code for places that black people live) that America is a fundamentally just society. We thought that we had judicial mechanisms sufficient to satisfy all segments of the population – if not *equally*, at least on some kind of sliding scale. We thought racism was on the downswing. Black comedians, rappers, and religious authorities seemed to be ministering to the disproportionate attention young black men attracted from police. Culturally, we'd accepted, on a broad level, that being black meant that you were more likely to go to prison or have trouble with law enforcement. We accepted similar things about the Hispanic population, and rarely thought anything about the Native American communities – they were wisely placed on reservations many years ago, and given responsibility over themselves, which meant that what happened to them was their fault, and not ours. Recently, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. We've seen behind the curtain. And the truth is this: while the punishment and social opprobrium have discouraged certain obvious forms of racism, racism itself is as thick on American life as pond scum on a still pond.

When I was in Afghanistan, one of the most remarkable lessons was that justice, and governance, were largely arbitrary – matters of aesthetics. One village would be ruled by a pro-government militia (Afghan Police and Army rarely patrolled, much of what we called “government controlled” land in Afghanistan was, in fact, militia controlled). The militia would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes. In other words, they acted like the Police, and tribal mechanisms

(elders, etc.) acted like our judiciary. Another village, across a road, or some other terrain feature, would be ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes using Sharia law – a Mullah would interpret crimes and, having established guilt or innocence, would impose punishment based on the Koran.

Whether a village accepted militia or Taliban rule was a combination of self-interest, security, group preference, and other variables that I do not claim to have understood, as an outsider. The important takeaway, for the purposes of this article, and understanding the role justice plays in our own society, is that *literally any* mechanism was preferable to none, and that the role of “justice” was to keep the peace, was to ensure social stability, and an absence of strife or struggle within a given community. Otherwise, war resulted. Without justice, tribes would go to war against one another over disputed resources, in a heartbeat. This was the situation on the border of Pakistan, territory the government didn’t even have the strength to dispute in 2007, let alone manage.

Our American justice system has been failing for a while, now, and the only reason it hasn’t been more obvious is that it’s only been failing certain portions of the population. For those individuals who are angry about this fact – that it took the well-publicized deaths of three consecutive black men under suspicious circumstances, and the refusal of a Grand Jury to acknowledge what our eyes and ears have shown reasonable people to be true – all I can say is that one knows what one knows. I can’t take responsibility for the past, but I can acknowledge the present, and agree with the obvious, logical assessment that things are not correct, things are not just. The system is creating unrest where it should be resolving unrest. The American justice system – and American society in general – is, in as fundamental a way as one can

imagine, broken.

The problem is not the police. I take great exception to the wealth of anger and opprobrium heaped upon our policemen and policewomen. The police are here to enforce our social standards, and they do so, quite effectively. Instead, we should be observing our own actions, and looking in the mirror to assess whether or not the problem lies within ourselves, the people of America. When you see a group of young black men, does part of you worry, does it provoke some nameless anxiety that is not felt when you're around a group of young white men? When you're sitting at a bar and a black man walks in, do you react differently from when a white man enters? Do you see a group of Hispanic people at a bus stop or in a parking lot and immediately draw conclusions about them, their motivations, their histories?

Of course you do. And when a young black man who stole a \$5 pack of swisher sweets cigarillos from a convenience store is shot by the police, when you breathe a silent sigh of relief: "one less scumbag who might get rape my wife and blast rap music loudly," that's not an indictment of the police, that's the police doing what you hoped they'd do. Ditto the hell-kid with the pistol replica, and the criminal giant who was blackly and horribly selling loose cigarettes for profit, illegally, on a street corner. *Not in my town, you think. Motherfucking property value killing monkeys.*

You can lie to me all you want, and you can also lie to yourself, if that's important to maintaining whatever fiction you're perpetuating. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is this: you're fine with the police hassling black people, because you think black people are criminals, and you want the police to hassle criminals. I feel the same way. We're in a safe place here, we can be honest with each other. I'm scared on the train when black and Hispanic people get on board on Bridgeport or Stamford – they rarely have tickets, and always have some cock-and-bull story about misplacing it, or

moving seats, or who knows what. My hypothesis? They're on the train to rob employed (this is white code for "white") people of their money and tickets.

So – but it's too obvious, now, that's the real problem with Ferguson and Eric Garner and "I can't breathe." The jig's up – people know who we are (white people, and specifically white men), and they know what we want, because they see our desires accomplished through our police. We need to make a change, so people stop rioting and burning the franchises that white people own, like CVS and Rite Aid and Family Dollar. We need to give the blacks justice – even if that means occasionally sacrificing a police officer to a kangaroo court. After all, this is really about *our* safety, and our ability to hold onto the grudges and stereotypes we cherish. If we don't feed the occasional officer to the wolves, it'll all be too obvious, and we'll actually have to change how we think about black people, and women, and Mexicans, and Chinese, and homosexuals. Police officers understand why they get paid overtime and hazardous duty – it's not so they should be safe – they're keeping *us* safe. And sometimes that means we have to hang a police officer up high, by the neck, to prevent the rabble from rioting, from getting on the train and stealing and looting and burning.