Open Space of Democracy

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... where power is circular, not linear; a power reserved not for an entitled few, but shared and maintained by many.

"We can only attain harmony and stability by consulting ensemble," writes Walt Whitman. This is my definition of community, and community interaction is the white-hot center of a democracy that burns bright.

Within the refuge, if I rotate slowly in place, what I see is a circumference of continuity. What I feel is a spiritual cohesion born out of wholeness. It is organic, cellular. I am at home in the peace of an intact world. The open space of democracy is not interested in hierarchies but in networks and systems where power is circular, not linear; a power reserved not for an entitled few, but shared and maintained by many. Public lands are our public commons and they belong to everyone. We enter these sacred lands soulfully and remember what it is we have forgotten—the gift of time and space. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the literal open space of democracy. The privilege of being here is met with the responsibility I feel to experience and express its compounding grace.

—Terry Tempest Williams

# On Behalf of the Common Good

Terry Tempest Williams's *The Open Space of Democracy*, sixteen years after its first publication, still challenges us to wake up, pay attention, and do the deep, difficult work of inclusive justice: "Question. Stand. Speak. Act." The *North American Review* takes this challenge seriously, not as a puzzle to be solved but as a continual process to engage and struggle with. We question, stand, speak, act—and create a space where others may do so, too.

The writing in the following pages responds to this challenge, and to the particular challenges of our day—racist violence, ecological devastation, political, national, psychological fragmentation. Each writer answers the call with a peculiar beauty of their own. "In the open space of democracy," Williams writes, "beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival as a species." But beauty need not be merely pleasing. It can do more than just delight. In fact, at its best, beauty itself is a challenge, a provocation, not aesthetic but political, forcing from us an answer. "The threat of beauty," Williams calls it, where what is threatened is self-interest, complacency, ignorance, privilege. Democracy requires, therefore, that we "vacate the comfortable seat of certitude, remain pliable, and act, ultimately, on behalf of the common good." What exactly the "common good" means is part of the ongoing conversation, and we're listening. We intend to remain just such an open space of democracy, a community where threatening, provocative beauty can be nurtured, honored, and shared, offered for the benefit of the common good.

Since its founding in 1815, the NAR has been interested in promoting the common good, the public good, the greater American good—but the editorial attitude back then, of course, among the privileged young men of Harvard publishing their gentlemanly review for "the wise and the good" of New England, was decidedly elitist, hierarchical, skeptical of the kind of open democracy we fully embrace today. We hope this and future contributions to the common good may also be, above all else, restorative. In these pages we offer art we believe, yes, can be personally and soulfully restorative, but also historically restorative. Because it is the oldest literary magazine in the United States, the NAR's gaze has often been retrospective, admiring its two hundred years of back pages as a monument to its own importance, "sepulchres of the fathers." Familiar versions of history, however, elide or distort the truth and transform it into myth. We have often claimed, proudly, that to read the *North American Review* is to read the history of the United States. If we are to dive into the wreck of American history, including the teetering wreck we currently find ourselves in, we must also have the courage to face, as Adrienne Rich puts it, "the thing itself and not the myth," to bring back to the surface not only what is to be found there but also what is not.

... Brown was killed during the hottest August on record, which slowly bled into the hottest September and then ...

# The Powers That Be: On History, Heat, and Killing

## AN ESSAY BY DAEGAN MILLER

*Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat.*
—*Ralph Ellison*, Invisible Man

- *August 9, 2014: Officer Darren Wilson kills Michael Brown.*
- *August, 2014: The hottest August ever recorded.*
- *August 9, 1854: "'Walden' published."*

I didn't know what else to do and so I held a moment of silence. It was in November, near the end of the semester, and I stood up, in my professorial tweed jacket, onstage behind a lectern, fronting a crowd of mostly college freshmen who were cast in the clammy deep shadows of an enormous, dingy, concrete bowl of a lecture hall, all of them there to learn from me the history of the US to the Civil War, but all of us with one fact staring back in our bleary early-morning faces: Officer Darren Wilson, who, three months earlier, in August, had gunned down in a Ferguson, Missouri street an eighteen-year-old, unarmed, black, soon-to-be college student named Michael Brown, would not be indicted, would face no criminal charges, would never stand trial in court.

I didn't know what my students expected of me. For some, the outcome—law and order affirmed—was something to celebrate. For most, it was a tragedy. And, I suspect, for still others it was confirmation of a fact they had long known: black life means little in the United States. Up on my stage, high with an elevated illusion of authority, I felt an adult's obligation to make sense for my students of what ought to have been senseless. The night before class, I wrote out a gambler's deck of increasingly desperate lectures, but all fell far short and slipped into my tottering scrap heap of never-given histories because each was ultimately intended for an audience of one—for me. I wrote the things that *I* wanted to hear, things that would make me feel better, lectures that I desperately hoped would shake the world's shards into a sensible pattern that I could read, that I could master. But the truth was I had no idea what my students wanted, let alone needed. The truth was I had no idea what I needed.

Instead, I held a minute of silence.

Sixty quick seconds to signal the passing of a life.

I didn't know what else to do.

Brown, I later realized, was killed during the hottest August on record, which slowly bled into the hottest September and then the hottest October in the 135 years that humans have been keeping track of such things. Enough of 2014's months were sufficiently hot to make it the warmest year ever, up to that point, a bleak record whose setting seems to signal a slide toward the end of life as we know it, an end, even, for a great deal of earthly life itself. When the journalist Elizabeth Kolbert tried to get a handle on how many of the Earth's species would vanish in what many are now calling earth's sixth extinction—a global-climate-change-driven die-off that may be on par with the asteroid-triggered event that ended the dinosaurs' reign—she couldn't get an authoritative answer from the scientific community. Some models showed that 52 percent of the Earth's species would be "committed to extinction" by 2050. Some *only* 9 percent. Scientists won't really know for sure until the bodies are through piling up, though the consensus is that a self-aware, rational, reflective species who willfully did little to curb their own waste will usher in an eon of humid silence unlike anything humans have ever known. But, I'm inclined to think, the body count doesn't really matter. Fifty-two or nine—numbers mean nothing when the scale is insensible.

One hundred and sixty Augusts earlier, Henry David Thoreau finally published his second book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, to almost no fanfare, noting in his journal for the day it officially appeared only, "'Walden' published."

August facts: Brown and climate change and *Walden* on a bookstore's shelves—all meaningless by themselves. But strike a fact against another at the right angle and there's a chance that, for a sharp moment, sparks might flare long enough to set a story alight, and so give midnight shape.

I'm not sure why my thoughts wandered to *Walden*, other than that my mind has always lived in the past, even before I trained to be a professional historian; I'm not sure why my mind wandered, but, in that season of loss, it did. Perhaps it was drawn by affinity: *Walden*, as the philosopher Stanley Cavell argued, is narrated by a person whose voice is fundamentally colored by loss, no matter the narrator's claim to "brag as lustily as the chanticleer in the morning." Thoreau's own biography bears Cavell's insight out: when he went to the Walden woods, on the outskirts of his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts, to build a small cabin in which he would live for two years, his brother John, the best friend Henry would ever have, had been dead for only a short while. John was the victim of a shaving-accident-induced tetanus infection. He died in Henry's arms. Thoreau was so disconsolate that he came down with a sympathetic, entirely phantom case of lockjaw himself, one that would wreck his health: it would be months before Henry was well enough to even potter about his family's house. When he finally had fully recovered, he found himself filled with anxious, aimless energy. Part of the reason he went to the Walden woods—"to drive life into a corner"—was to write his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, an elegy and account of a boating trip he and John had embarked upon in 1839. He emerged

... Gray was placed face down on the ground, denied request for his inhaler—"I can't breathe," he said—then loaded into a police van, his hands shackled behind his back ...

from his stay with a manuscript in hand, but more importantly, he carried with him the seeds of what, a decade later, would become *Walden*.

As I continue to breathe in the great unmitigated losses of our time, to witness an unfolding history of life ending in the age of killer cops and global climate change, I find that my thoughts frequently return me to the shores of Walden Pond, in search of what I hope will be insight.

I hadn't yet thought any of these thoughts, though, in November of 2014, and as silence rolled through the auditorium, I shut my eyes, hoping that the world would cohere.

- *April 19, 2015: Freddie Gray dies after a "rough ride" in a police van.*
- *April 2015: The hottest April global sea surface temperature ever recorded.*
- *April 19, 1852: "That oak by Derby's is a grand object, seen from any side… But I fear a price is set upon its sturdy trunk and roots for ship-timber, for knees to make stiff the sides of ships against the Atlantic billows."*

I like to walk, and I walked a lot in April of 2015, a year that would go on to steal away 2014's record as hottest ever. Walking has always been a way for me to stop all the chatter in my head and think more clearly than when I'm deskbound. I walked a lot in April 2015, and I wrote a lot, and my life was good.

Freddie Gray was out walking that same April, on the 12th, but, at 8:39 in the morning, while I walked to my office, he had the bad luck to catch the eye of Lieutenant Brian W. Rice of the Baltimore Police Department. A 40-second chase followed, and, after surrendering to the police, Gray was handcuffed, placed face down on the ground, denied request for his inhaler—"I can't breathe," he said—then loaded into a police van, his hands shackled behind his back, unrestrained by a seatbelt. Sometime before 9:00 A.M., Gray, a too-delicately-human pinball ricocheting around the back of the van during a deliberately "rough ride," had his neck broken. By 9:24 A.M. he was rushed to the University of Maryland's Shock Trauma Center, where he would die, a week later, of his police-inflicted injuries. He had done nothing wrong and the six public servants—Caesar R. Goodson, Jr., Garrett E. Miller, Edward M. Nero, William G. Porter, Alicia D. White, and fleet-footed Rice—walked away from the courthouse, free.

Thoreau also liked to walk—he claimed to need at least four hours a day for sauntering in order to keep sane and healthy—but in 1846 he found himself toe-to-toe with Concord's local constable, Sam Staples. Thoreau was in the middle of his two-year stay at Walden Pond, and he was walking the mile and a half back to Concord to pick up a worn-out shoe that had been repaired, when Staples stopped him for nonpayment of taxes. Thoreau, it turns out, was a well-known tax resister. The United States was in the midst of the Mexican-American War, a war waged for the benefit of southern slaveholders who wanted to expand their slave-based cotton-plantation economy into Texas and, ultimately, the entire Mexican-controlled Southwest, and a number of radical abolitionists, Thoreau included, refused to pay their taxes. They were protesting a government that would send troops to seize land for slavery. So Staples, though on friendly personal terms with Thoreau, had a job to do, and whisked him off to jail.

Thoreau famously spent only one night in the lockup—his aunt most likely paid his back taxes for him—but it was an electric night, and it sparked what has become one of the most influential essays in American radical politics, "Civil Disobedience," whose anarchistic argument that a state can have "no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it" inspired Mahatma Gandhi in his efforts to rid India of British colonial rule. It's also the essay that Martin Luther King, Jr., obliquely references in his own 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." King had discovered Thoreau in college, and finding him was a watershed moment in King's intellectual development. "The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement," King wrote; "indeed, they are more alive than ever before."

Thoreau came alive in the Walden woods, where he found the plot line that made his world make sense. Vivid, free life and the dull death of the well-regulated machine: this opposition is at the heart of "Civil Disobedience," and, indeed, of Thoreau's entire body of work. His writing ambles constantly back to people who have become cogs, or wooden men manufactured by the state—a vast, inhuman, senseless and inanimate thing that grinds life down into precisely knowable, precisely predictable, precisely interchangeable quantities. Into commodities to be bought and sold. "I was not born to be forced," wrote Thoreau; and, "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man."

Thoreau knew of what he wrote. He was born in 1817, and in 1862 died at the age of 45. Though his time was short, he witnessed the reign of King Cotton, the insatiable territorial appetite of Manifest Destiny, and the explosion of the Industrial Revolution in the US, an event largely driven by the growth of factories. The famous Lowell textile mills, America's first factory system whose doors opened just as a young Henry was taking his first toddling steps, were a short trip downstream from Concord, and he didn't have to go far to see humans turned into cogs, the landscape into a factory's appendage. By the end of his life, Thoreau shared the Concord River's banks with at least 58 mills, their dams, and their millponds, all of which artificially regulated the flowage of river water with such precision that Thoreau could set his watch by how high and how fast the capital-regulated current flowed. Like the hands at work amidst the belts and pulleys of weaving machines, the rivers of Massachusetts were forced to keep factory time. "Trade curses everything it handles," wrote Thoreau.

> I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. . . . [T]he principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.

Trade is a curse, he could have added, because it turned everything—Derby's oak and Walden pond, alike—into a commodity awaiting exploitation.

Land, like a black life, was cheap, and profit called. It was to extend the range of King Cotton that the Mexican-American War was fought and Thoreau thrown in jail.

The point of *Walden* is to discover what life in the mid-nineteenth century was, and it is often forgotten that *Walden*, despite its caricature as a celebration of untouched wilderness and go-it-alone individualism, is a book explicitly about the way people relate to one another and their world. The first, and by far the longest, chapter in the book, after all, is called "Economy," and Thoreau was clear-eyed about how the developing capitalist, market economy of the US entangled everyone and everything in the nation. On the side of Walden Pond opposite his house ran the Fitchburg Railroad, and Thoreau wrote of how the cotton came on the train up from the South, to the Lowell mills, and then back down again, in the form of cloth. That fair cotton was planted, picked, and processed by thousands of black slaves laboring in Southern fields, whose number nearly tripled over the course of Thoreau's lifetime. These slaves were responsible for a 700% rise in cotton production during the same period, an efficiency that, historian Ed Baptist has recently shown, was nightly beaten out of them in an ultimately successful effort to drive up the rate at which a human hand could pluck a tuft of cotton from its boll. It was this cotton that kept northern mills, like Lowell's, humming busily along; it was this cotton that kept the golden coins jingling in the pockets of America's budding capitalists; and if not for stolen black labor, the American Industrial Revolution—indeed, the modern world—might not have happened.

But the industrialized, slave-dependent economy was never only a way of organizing society: it was also an environmental regime, and the brutality of cotton planting and mechanized cloth weaving was also visited upon the back of the land. Cotton cultivation was almost as hard on the soil as it was on a living human body, and many southern plantation owners argued that it was more profitable to have their slaves work the land until it failed, then move on, rather than to practice anything even remotely resembling sustainable farming, just as many argued that it was maximally profitable to work a slave hard until his death, and then replace him cheaply with another. Land, like a black life, was cheap, and profit called. It was to extend the range of King Cotton that the Mexican-American War was fought and Thoreau thrown in jail.

Another way of putting this is: cotton was the oil of the nineteenth century.

- *November 23, 2014: Tamir Rice dies after being shot by Officer Timothy Loehmann.*
- *November, 2014: November concludes the globally hottest fall ever recorded.*
- *November 23, 1860: "What if the Concord Social Club, instead of eating oranges from Havana, should spend an hour in admiring the beauty of some wild berry from their fields which they never attended to before?"*

I watched, flame-drunk, as Ferguson burned, while the cameras whirred safely away an archive of images: knots of grief-wracked protestors with fists and peace-signing hands in the air; a defiant black Jesus, backlit by fire, whose anger-stiffened middle fingers salute the riot police; dozens of heavily armed, militarized cops confronting a lone, dreadlocked, camera-festooned pedestrian; shields, and armored vehicles, and assault rifles, and batons, and barking dogs, and tear gas wielded by those sworn to serve and protect. And then one day before the Grand Jury refused to indict Darren Wilson, we all learned that, in Cleveland, Officer Timothy Loehmann, who had earlier been deemed emotionally unstable and unfit for duty, shot and killed a twelve-year-old child named Tamir Rice. Loehmann had been on the scene for only two seconds—less than the moment it takes to draw and exhale a silent breath—before he ended Rice's life. Before he killed a child.

Like Wilson, like Gray's killers, Loehmann was let go.

I can think of few things more senseless than deliberately shooting a kid. We'll never know who Tamir Rice may have grown into, whom he would have loved, what he would have done, the lives he would have changed—perhaps yours or mine—for better or for ill, the loss that his murder has bequeathed to us all. I can think of nothing more nihilistic than pointing a gun at the living, laughing future while it sits at a picnic bench and pulling the trigger. But as much as I want to hang the sole responsibility for Rice's killing around Loehmann's neck, I also know that Loehmann did not act alone, and that I, and most likely you who are reading this, we, too, are complicit, for the police represent humble us—at least those of us who are white, somewhere above poor, with some sense that the gears of society revolve, even marginally, for our benefit. Ta-Nehisi Coates put it starkly in *Between the World and Me*:

> The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country's criminal justice policy it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressed minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies...are the product of democratic will.

The last time I encountered the law, it was because I had walked into a police station, looking for my lost wallet. I carried under my arm a copy of Emma Goldman's essays, and a knife, similar to the one that was ultimately found on Freddie Gray and used to retroactively justify his killing, in my pocket. I meant no harm. I'm a vegetarian and a pacifist and a country boy who has carried a pocketknife, even to school, every day since the sixth grade, because pocketknives are good for trimming fingernails and removing staples and tightening the tiny screws on eyeglasses and a thousand other mundane tasks. I walked into the police station with my pocketknife and my collection of anarchist provocation, chatted with the officer on duty about his favorite local Wisconsin beer, recovered my wallet, and walked out. "Have a nice day, sir," the cop shot after me as I left.

It was in the fall of 2014, far too late, that many of us first learned to say Black Lives Matter, a phrase that shocks because, though it should be obviously, tautologically true—like declaring the sky blue—it highlights that in the US, black lives, from the days of the slave to the era of redlining, legally mattered only to the extent that they can turn a profit. One of the revelations from the Department of Justice's investigation into the Ferguson Police Department is that Ferguson's nearly all-white police force sees the town's black population "less as constituents to be protected than as potential

**Forest cover had to be cleared and stumps pulled, trees turned to lumber, coal unstitched from its seam, ore borne into daylight, rivers dammed or diverted for irrigation, animals flayed ...**

offenders and sources of revenue" to be raised through petty citations and fines. "Black life is cheap," writes Coates, "but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value."

Coates's point is that the sunny American celebration of can-do entrepreneurship has always been underwritten by brutality—by African American sweat and blood. But it's also true that American Progress has always relied on a foundation of environmental degradation. Forest cover had to be cleared and stumps pulled, trees turned to lumber, coal unstitched from its seam, ore borne into daylight, rivers dammed or diverted for irrigation, animals flayed for the leather that would become drive belts, all of this had to happen before factory and field could begin production. Then came waste, production's unwanted twin, returned back to the communal land and water and air. This was, of course, all before pesticides and big agribusiness, Peabody Coal and mountaintop removal, ExxonMobil and fracking and deepwater oil drilling. Great power comes with tremendous filth, which is right now turning the placid waters of the ocean into caustic acid ("Great Barrier Reef at 'Terminal Stage': Scientists Despair at Latest Coral Bleaching Data" read the headline from *The Guardian* on April 9, 2017), the atmosphere into a hothouse, the stable weather into a maniac, and these changes are happening far too fast for the slow pace of evolution to keep up. As the social ecologist Murray Bookchin pointed out, we're reversing the history of life on earth, away from complexity and diversity, back toward a planet that supports only the simplest forms of life.

Global climate change and killer cops. Though the two might seem like different concerns, one environmental, the other social, the fact is they branch from the same root: a society dedicated to transforming life into profit. Thoreau was one of the very few who saw this, early on, and he would have been unsurprised by global climate change, a scaled-up version of the environmental degradation he was witnessing in his own time. He was thinking of slavery in "Civil Disobedience" when, foreshadowing Coates, he wrote "The opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians in the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity," but switch just a few words and transport him to the twenty-first century and you've got a succinct analysis of climate change.

I finally realized that I returned to *Walden* for the comfort I found. Here was a world, wrought of words, that I could understand; a world limned by Thoreau's anger and hope, lit by the insight that all lives are connected: all lives—black, white, and nonhuman—striving to live unfettered and free. "In wildness is the preservation of the world," he famously wrote in his ever-evolving lecture, "Walking," a lecture that he spent years revising and was refining even as he lay dying from tuberculosis in 1862. Wildness, as Thoreau well knew, is ever the enemy of the machine, the uncontrollable wobble that will eventually set all the gears loose.

- *July 17, 2014: Officer Daniel Pantaleo kills Eric Garner.*
- *July, 2014: The 38th consecutive July and 353rd consecutive month with a global temperature above the twentieth-century average.*
- *July 17, 1857: "Am caught in the rain and take shelter under the thick white pine by Lee's Cliff. I see thereunder an abundance of chimaphila in bloom. It is a beautiful flower."*

I couldn't watch the videos. Not of Philando Castile, shot seven times by St. Anthony, Minnesota, police officer Jeronimo Yanez, as he bled to death beside his screaming girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter who, with the infinite wisdom of a child, cautioned her mother: "Mom, please don't scream 'cause I don't want you to get shooted"; not of the unarmed Walter Scott, who was shot in the back by Michael Slager, an officer of the North Charleston police department, as he ran; not of Charles Kinsey, a behavioral therapist accompanying his patient with autism, who was lying on the ground with his hands in the air when a member of North Miami's SWAT Team, Jonathan Aledda, shot him. I couldn't watch Officer Jason Van Dyke kill Laquan McDonald, or Deputy Robert Bates kill Eric Courtney Harris, or Sergeant John Poulos kill Kajuan Raye, or Officer Ray Tensing kill Samuel DuBose, or Officer Betty Shelby kill Terence Crutcher. I didn't watch the videos of cops and school administrators body slamming black high school students to the floor. And, a father with two boys of my own, I refused to watch the killing of Tamir Rice.

But, for reasons I still don't understand, I did decide to watch Eric Garner die. I did watch him tell the man who would choke him to death, New York Police Department Officer Daniel Pantaleo, "Please just leave me alone," and, eleven different times: "I can't breathe."

I don't remember where I was when I saw the video, or why I clicked play on my screen, but I did, and I do remember thinking, as Garner gasped desperately for air, of Radio Raheem, the boom-box-toting character in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). The film is set in New York, during a scorching summer heat wave, and in its climactic scene Raheem—whose cassette player blared the film's chorus, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power"—is choked to death by an NYPD cop. I remember thinking that if movies were real, and Raheem had lived, he might have grown up to be killed by Pantaleo; that if movies were prophecies to which we paid heed, Garner might still be alive.

Summer facts: Bill McKibben must have believed in the power of science and prophecy and precise prose when his book, *The End of Nature*, the first accessible treatment of global climate change, debuted—also in 1989. If so, he was wrong. Instead, due to what McKibben would later call a wildly successful "bipartisan effort to do nothing," *The End of Nature* has been no more effective than *Do the Right Thing* at cooling the daily violence of our times. As I write this, in early 2017, the news has just been announced that 2016 broke 2015's temperature record, which had broken 2014's. It will undoubtedly be warmer twenty-four hours from right now, and quite possibly bloodier: January, 2017 saw the most people killed by police in one month since July, 2015.

Tomorrow can't but inherit the past; it is the nature of fact to strike with the force of inevitability.

... simply the vital, self-willed current of life. To inspire is to breathe in, to breathe in spirit. To be wild is to be untamed, unbordered, undisciplined. A wild fruit obeys its own nature.

"They honestly think there is no choice left," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, hoping his words would lead a reader like myself from history's morass. "But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices." Though there are 150 years' worth of arguments over the exact meaning of Thoreau's masterpiece, it's not hard to see that the book is an attempt to figure out the value of life in an age that was just becoming unmistakably modern and industrialized, which is to say an age that was coming to value life mainly for the monetary value into which it could be converted. Thoreau, in one of *Walden*'s most famous passages, writes that he went to the woods to "live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." He wanted to "live deep and suck all the marrow out of life," and if that marrow turned out to be rancid and not sweet, he wanted to let that flavor linger on his tongue, too, the better to know despair. Yet, despite the complexity of the text, I've always been inclined to think that what Thoreau wants us to know is actually quite simple. Life is ultimately and always ungovernable, ever wild. We have a choice. "This is the only way, we say," writes Thoreau, "but there are as many ways as there can be radii from one center. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant."

We have a choice: we can choose the wild, and when Thoreau wrote of wildness, he meant something far different from the celebration of wilderness for which he is often mistaken. The word "wild" appears hundreds of times in Thoreau's journals, essays, poems, and books, and though he refused to define it, it's worth pointing out that Thoreau went to Walden because it *wasn't* untouched wilderness, but a sort of halfway state, "half-civilized" as he put it, the kind of place that nurtured wild fruits—the sour huckleberries, feral apples, and native grapes—in hedgerow, meadow, and woodlot. Wildness was a mixture. And when Thoreau placed something wild on his tongue, his senses were awakened by "wild flavors of the Muse, vivacious and inspiriting."

Wild. Vivacious. Inspiriting. It turns out that, for Thoreau, wildness is simply the vital, self-willed current of life. To inspire is to breathe in, to breathe in spirit. To be wild is to be untamed, unbordered, undisciplined. A wild fruit obeys its own nature. If, as Thoreau famously wrote in *Walden*, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," that is because, at root, we, too, are wild and spirited and unfitted to the grind of workaday life, our natures more like the sour fruits of the forest and field than the industrial machinery on the factory floor, more vivacious than anything permitted by the overseer's lash.

We are all descendants of Thoreau's era, and though we've come a long way from the dark days of chattel slavery and completely unregulated industry, things don't always seem all that different. Ours is an age in which overwhelming deadly force is still used asymmetrically against African Americans to protect white privilege. Ours is an age in which the alienated human machinery of industry continues to generate immense profits for its owners, while poisoning the world's skies, soils, and waters. Ours is an age in which the legacy of industrialization, all the $CO_2$ from the factorial descendants of Lowell, threatens the entire world as we've all, everywhere known it.

Thoreau went to the woods on July 4th, 1845, in the gray aftermath of his brother's death, a member of a world whose human cogs he desperately feared becoming, there to finally awake. "Grow wild according to thy nature," Thoreau counseled, for to be wild is to be free.

"Grow wild according to thy nature."

I think that's the lecture that I wanted to hear myself give on the morning that we all learned Darren Wilson would never stand trial for killing an eighteen-year-old, soon-to-be college student named Michael Brown, at the end of the warmest fall any human had ever known. Something angry and hopeful and ultimately instructive, a crystalline history that I precipitated out of the murky dim past, that connected seemingly disparate things and made them come clear, that I could give to my students seeking sense where senselessness reigned. I wanted to believe that my PhD meant that I especially understood history, had the insight to see it bend toward justice, could espy a way forward. I wanted to give hope. But what if, as Ralph Ellison put it in *Invisible Man*, "history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile," and what if this madman carried a gun and a badge or ran a company? What if there's no sense to be found, nothing for a rational mind to grasp: How do you decide to destroy the world? How do you decide to shoot a child?

"None of us," Ellison concluded, "seems to know who he is or where he's going."

- *November 11, 2017: Officer Caesar Goodson, Jr., who drove the van that killed Freddie Gray, is acquitted of all charges in Gray's death.*
- *November 11, 2017: Syria signs the Paris Climate Agreement. The US remains the only functional government in the world refusing to abide by the Agreement's terms.*
- *November 11, 1859: I saw the withered leaves blown from an oak by the roadside dashing off, gyrating, and surging upward into the air, so exactly like a flock of birds sporting with one another that, for a moment at least, I could not be sure they were not birds; and it suggested how far the motion of birds, like those of leaves, might be determined by currents of air.*

I held a moment of silence to mark the passing of a life, and when I opened my eyes to the still, lightless underground hall, whatever wisdom I had hoped would show itself remained hidden, and I stood, alone and naked and pale, before 150 pairs of eyes, all of them insensible to the day's lecture projected on a screen behind me.

It was a windy November, near the end of the semester, and outside, aboveground, a clear cold blue sky buoyed one wild sandhill crane as it called in its antediluvian croak to an unseen companion, headed south, as sandhill cranes always have done, to wait out the winter. □