

An excerpt from Barbara Kingsolver's personal essay, *Jabberwocky*, in her collection of essays entitled *High Tide in Tucson*.

At the height of the Gulf War, I found in the *New York Times* this quote from Loren Thompson, director of the national security program at Georgetown University, explaining why the Pentagon wasn't releasing information about deaths in Iraq. When bomb damage is listed only in technical terms, he said, "you avoid talking about lives lost, and that serves both an esthetic and a practical purpose."

The esthetic and practical purpose, of course, is the loss of empathy. We seem to be living in the age of anesthesia, and it's no wonder. Confronted with knowledge of dozens of apparently random disasters each day, what can a human heart do but slam its doors? No mortal can grieve that much. We didn't evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale. Our defense is to pretend there's no thread of event that connects us, and that those lives are somehow not precious and real like our own. It's a practical strategy, to some ends, but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that's no small tradeoff.

Art is the antidote that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another. By virtue of that power, it is political, regardless of content. If *Jane Eyre* is a great romance, it has also given thousands of men a female experience, and a chance to feel the constraints that weighed upon women of Jane's time. Through art, a woman can give a male reader the unparalleled athletic accomplishment of childbirth, or the annihilation of being raped; if every man knew both those things, I would expect the world to change tomorrow. We have all heard plenty about each other's troubles, but evidently it's not enough to be told, it has to be lived. And art is so very nearly the same as life.

I *know*, for example, that slavery was heinous, but the fate of sixty million slaves is too big a thing for a heart to understand. So it was not until I read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that I honestly felt that truth. When Sethe killed her children rather than have them grow up in slavery, I was so far from my sheltered self I knew the horror that could make infanticide an act of love. Morrison carved the tragedy of those sixty million, to whom the book is dedicated, into something small and dense and real enough to fit through the door, get in my heart, and explode. This is how a novel can be more true than a newspaper.

One of my favorite writings about writing is this excerpt from Ursula K. Leguin's introduction to her science-fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which she discusses fiction's role in what we call the truth:

"Fiction writers, at least in their braver moments, do desire the truth: to know it, speak it, serve it. But they go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur, and telling about these fictions in detail and at length and with a great deal of emotion, and then when they are done writing down this pack of lies, they say, There! That's the truth!

"...In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we're done with it, we may find that we're a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little...crossed a street we never crossed before. But it's very hard to say just what we learned, how we were changed.

The artist deals with what cannot be said in words."

This manifesto is a command that rules my writing life. I believe it means there are truths we all know, but can't make ourselves feel. Slavery was horrible. Love thy neighbor as

thyself, or we'll all go to hell in a handbasket. These are things that cannot be said in words because they're too familiar to move us, too big and bald and flat to penetrate our souls. The artist must craft missiles to deliver these truths so unerringly to the right place inside of us we are left panting, with no possibility of doubting they are true. The novelist must do this in story, image, and character. And make the reader believe.

To speak of this process as something that must fall either into the camp of "political" or "pure" is frankly absurd. Good art is political, whether it means to be or not, insofar as it provides the chance to understand points of view alien to our own. Its nature is the opposite of spiritual meanness, bigotry, and warfare. If it is disturbing at times, or unpalatable, it may be a good idea to buy it anyway.