

Writing Is Dangerous

Whenever, as a young person who was always protesting some egregious injustice against citizens, I was detained and asked if I'd ever been arrested, I would use satire in the form of Dante's levels through hell, from his *Inferno* or I would respond: "Which time?" Moments after an officer would get a glint in his eyes, thinking he'd caught a harden criminal, I'd add: "Fighting for the right to vote in Alabama; Protesting against redlining in Bedford Stuyvesant - civil disobedience is a very serious offense?" When viewed as a dissident, for simply exercising natural rights, disarming government sponsored opposition by using "metaphors or allegories" from great writing, was the only defense I had - a way to tell them that my only crime seemed to have been the ability to think, a skill I hadn't found in a majority's job description.

I had utilized Dante's witticism when I was politely removed from a scene at the *Fontana di Trevi* in Rome. A man had grabbed my rear end and I had promptly cold-cocked him with a bottle of cheap, French wine.

"You a hit him with a bottle a wine, not even a Italian wine," scolded *Polizia di Stato*, Gregorio La Trosciscana, smiling, after he had escorted me to the passenger side of his little European patrol car and began navigating his way through the narrow streets.

I wasn't at all offended at being interned in a patrol vehicle, I had run out of money and needed a ride to a chapel, about an hour away, to meet Umberto, an artist friend who was working on the restoration of artwork.

"You a ever been in a trouble in a Europe before?"

"Yes, I received a Level Eight, Bolgia #2, but I thought it should have been Level Nine, Bolgia #13," I answered, locking eyes with Gregorio, then, looking away, covering my mouth to hide a sly grin.

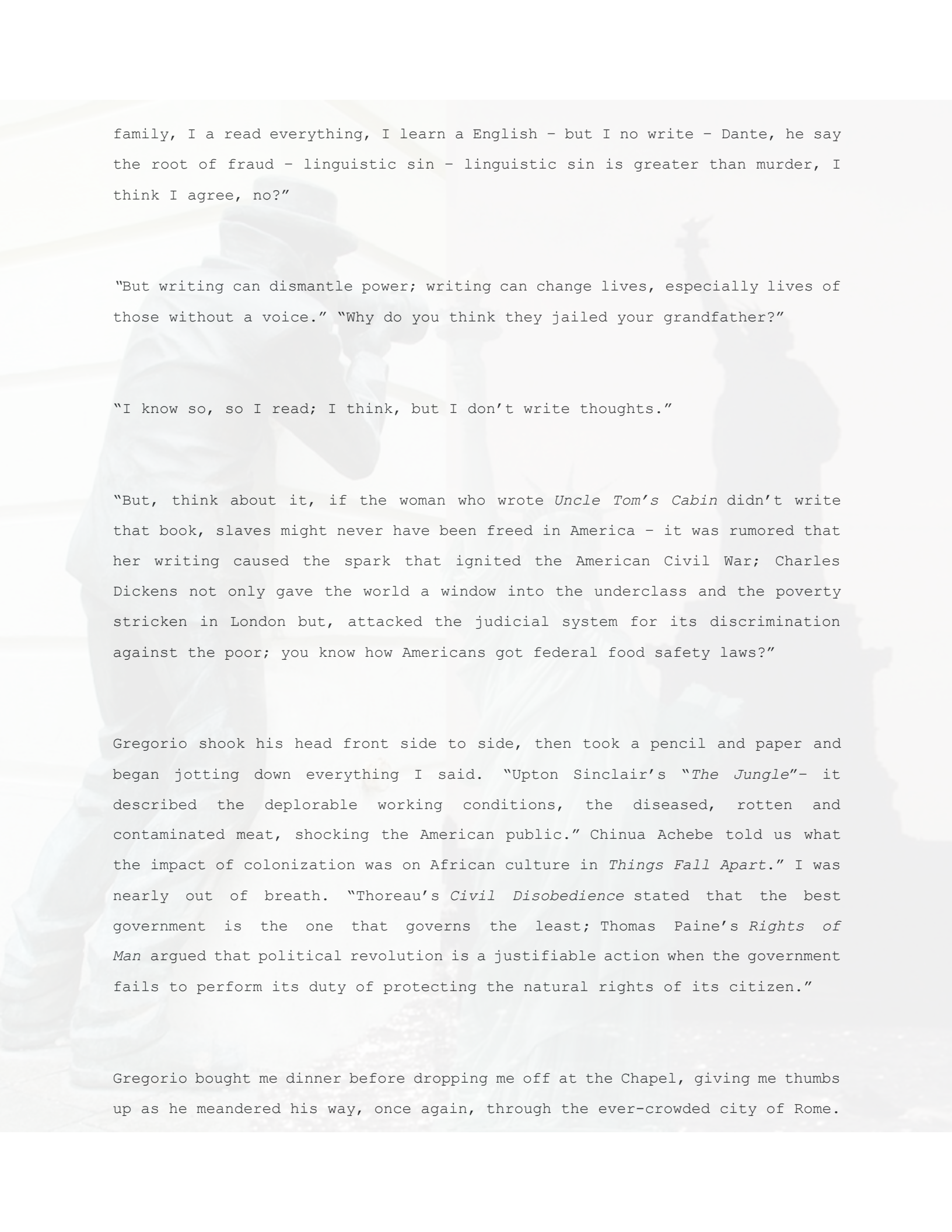
"Lasciate ogni speranza, o voi che entrate qui," chimed Gregorio after he had hopped out of the car and held the driver's side door open for me as if he'd just chauffeured me to a fine restaurant. Fear gripped me, had I gone too far? Was he actually going to throw me in jail? "You don't know it in Italiano, no?" Gregorio had strutted up the steps of an old building with Italian writing, holding open, yet another door.

"Know, know what?" I asked, biting my nails and climbing the steps with guarded trepidation. "Abandon all hope, you who enter here?" "Wow, a cop who, not only can read, but quote from *Dante's Inferno*, impressive." Gregorio smiled, loosening the bland, government issued tie around his neck, as he retrieved a chair, then motioned for me to sit. "Where are we, by the way?" I asked, staring up at an ornate ceiling.

"This is where my grandfather was detained by Polizia, my grandfather was, how do you say, protester, see that room, he had old printer press - he was jailed for writing a dangerous words, under Mussolini."

"Wow, what a great man, you must have been proud of him?"

"When you no have food to eat, you no so proud." Gregorio leaned in close to my face: "I want to go to a university so bad, but my family no money, I take care



family, I a read everything, I learn a English - but I no write - Dante, he say the root of fraud - linguistic sin - linguistic sin is greater than murder, I think I agree, no?"

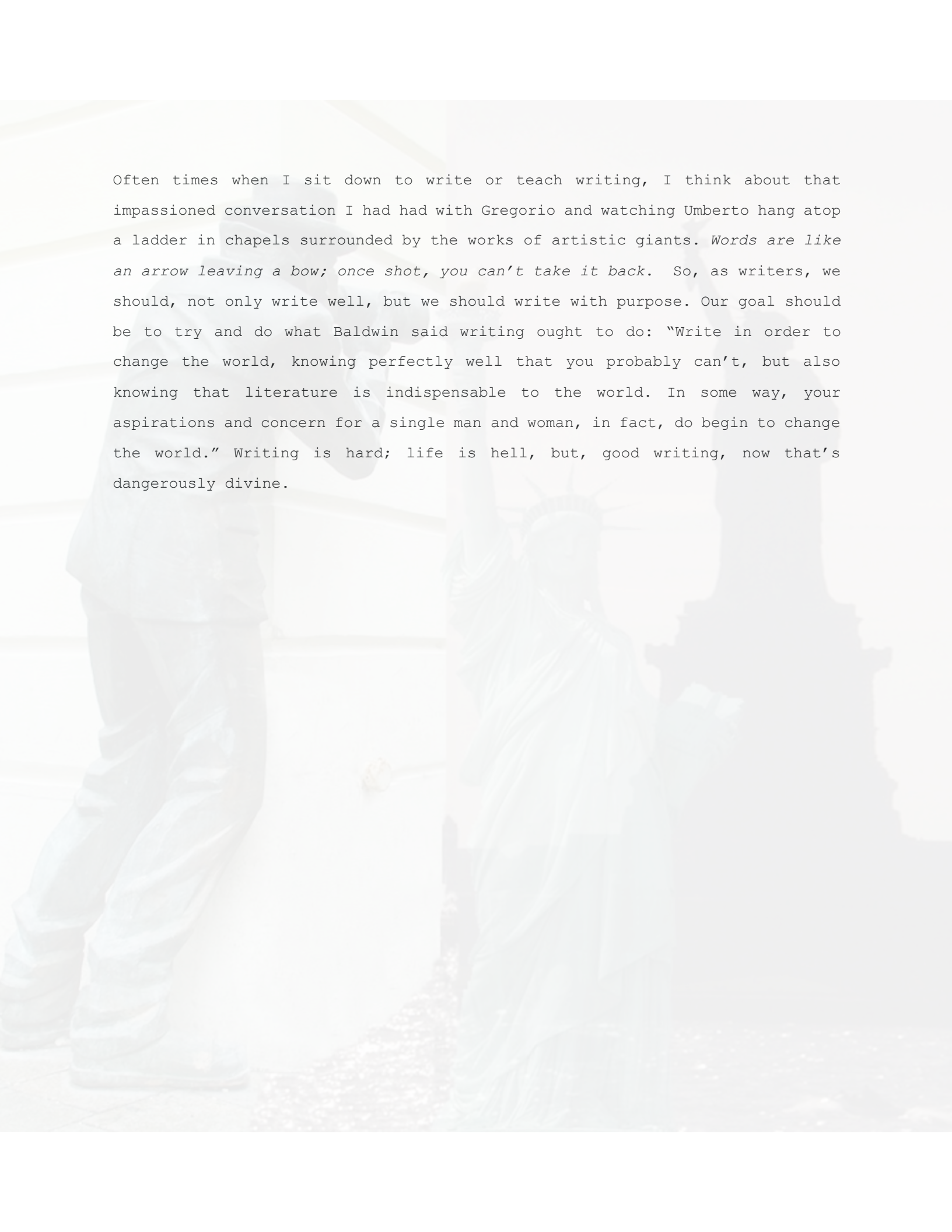
"But writing can dismantle power; writing can change lives, especially lives of those without a voice." "Why do you think they jailed your grandfather?"

"I know so, so I read; I think, but I don't write thoughts."

"But, think about it, if the woman who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* didn't write that book, slaves might never have been freed in America - it was rumored that her writing caused the spark that ignited the American Civil War; Charles Dickens not only gave the world a window into the underclass and the poverty stricken in London but, attacked the judicial system for its discrimination against the poor; you know how Americans got federal food safety laws?"

Gregorio shook his head front side to side, then took a pencil and paper and began jotting down everything I said. "Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*"- it described the deplorable working conditions, the diseased, rotten and contaminated meat, shocking the American public." Chinua Achebe told us what the impact of colonization was on African culture in *Things Fall Apart*." I was nearly out of breath. "Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* stated that the best government is the one that governs the least; Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* argued that political revolution is a justifiable action when the government fails to perform its duty of protecting the natural rights of its citizen."

Gregorio bought me dinner before dropping me off at the Chapel, giving me thumbs up as he meandered his way, once again, through the ever-crowded city of Rome.

The background of the page is a faded, light-colored image. It shows the Statue of Liberty in the center, with a person standing on the observation deck to the left. The person is wearing a light-colored jacket and pants. The overall tone is soft and artistic, with the text overlaid on top.

Often times when I sit down to write or teach writing, I think about that impassioned conversation I had had with Gregorio and watching Umberto hang atop a ladder in chapels surrounded by the works of artistic giants. *Words are like an arrow leaving a bow; once shot, you can't take it back.* So, as writers, we should, not only write well, but we should write with purpose. Our goal should be to try and do what Baldwin said writing ought to do: "Write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. In some way, your aspirations and concern for a single man and woman, in fact, do begin to change the world." Writing is hard; life is hell, but, good writing, now that's dangerously divine.