EDITORS' NOTE

It is with great excitement that we present to you the Spring 2013 issue of The Yale Literary Magazine. In this issue, we have exercised a multi-genre, multi-media investigation of the literary talents of Yale’s student body. The five poems you will find here represent a wide range of formal and thematic interests, from the traditionally lyrical to the bombastically confessional to the absurd. You will also find a sixth poem, a translation from Old English and the winner of the translation contest we held this semester. The issue’s heart-wrenching personal essay responds to our last issue’s interview on nonfiction’s role for young writers today. Our interview for this issue is with Tony Kushner; his responses are eager, specific, and linguistically delightful.

There is an honesty that permeates this issue, a willingness to translate a feeling, theory, or concern into something that transcends its creator. We are thrilled and honored by this semester’s contributions. Our greatest thanks to everyone involved.

Stay warm,
Love,
Sarah and Andrew
SECTION ONE

POETRY
A LETTER TO MY BROTHER

AVA KOFMAN
I.

Or in Lisbon, North Dakota, where my lesbian was chasing yours with a tuning fork

I could’ve sworn it was snowing. I had taken her in the bathroom that morning.

It was the only room in the whole state with any heating whatsoever.

"Did you know Francis Ford Coppola makes his own wine?" she asked me.

I said nothing. I was deep up her ass at this point and wasn’t going to come anytime soon. Not like this. I rubbed her rubbery breasts to keep myself warm.

"Apparently, it’s terrible," she added with a touch of pride, as though she was running a competing vineyard whose wine was the blood of poor Francis—godfather and saint.

II.

Later that night in the parking lot when my lesbian slipped on the black ice and fell, striking her belly and tuning fork all against the uneven pavement—stopping short her dyke-prey-friend in her petite dyke-tracks—my motor gasped out a final ecstatic roar collapsing in concert with her fall. And she only let out a little apple sigh.

We coughed broken cold laughs beside her. Even the little dyke looked unusually
capable of processing joy.
The car would be dead forever.
We ran back to the motel naked

in one of those non-literal nightscapes
that half-beats and bleeds
blue and yellow gas.

III.

Their crank was always rigid. Like a step backwards into a sunny kitchen.
All light and linoleum — a shock of a sort.

I was taking your Propecia for the fun of it then. And I was watching yours bathe herself, when she wasn’t looking.

And sometimes I would touch myself. Until one day, she would see me. And throwing back her head

her mouth began to scream,
and I didn’t reach to shove the soap down her soft contracting throat.
EVENT
HORIZON 2:
PRETTY ROOMS

JAKE ORBISON
I.

There are rooms in this universe that are locked. They have no peepholes.

II.

Inside is a nothing, a sweet one:

sweet like the nothing of a door; it just opens and closes, opens and closes, as there's nowhere to go.

It's not a wall; you can tell — you can see yourself in the varnish and the rest of the wall is white. But this: a maple ellipsis: at least it's not all there is, at least it's, at least there's nothing.

A full and glowing gasp (before the words):

I'm funny, and I'm comely, and you'll love this, yes, yes, yes!

III.

Outside thinks it's in, but hopes not, as it can see the rest of the room, watch it wane, watch it watch—

And watch, they say they see it's beautiful out there! There are growing gardenias and sometimes it's sunny, and other times it rains.

And, oh, they flick their hair cause all they see's the door:

I'm funny, and I'm comely, and you'll love this, yes, yes, yes!
THE SAFEST PLACE TO BE

MARGARET SHULTZ
is inside a bookshelf not breathing,
learning How the Mind Works and
The Peloponnesian War. As for suffocation,
it is knowing the area beneath the curve;
without this how will the lake be emptied,
and who will hold the girders in place with
chains of flawless steel?

I myself have never made anything standing that
could stay standing. I am susceptible both
to heat and cold, not partial to either, and
I step outside and walk across to that farther shore,
thinking of silence turned to skin.

There is no dreaming but a thought
long and slow like a wave, and fresh skin, wet
and gasping like a swimmer far from land.
There is no wind but the wind I carry with me.
And no ocean, and no rain.

And there are birds that fly for months and months over
water without ever seeing land.
TELL THE MOON

SHON ARIEH-LERER
Suspended from the hospital ceiling, Arlecchino gives birth to the moon.

Documents are written to the new moon.

A curled shoe presses record:

Arlecchino is crying tears. His son is breaking a man’s heart for the first time.

Documents are written telling the moon what it is to break a heart or have a son.
I.

I blew up a mountain into the face of my shrinks.
I was saying thanks.

In the far corner is the mien of Herb Eveloff,
shrink of my earliest days.
It must've been very tough treating me, mom, dad, and both sisters.
My seating posture is modeled after him.
He told me to carve out small alcoves of meaning,
which was preferable to jumping off the very expensive stone balcony.

He knows that for youth, song is what to share
(I LOVED YOU! I LOVED YOU! I LOVED YOU!)
this is his song, whistled through the nose cavities
of the great mountain:

\[ \text{Carthago delenda est:} \\
\text{Beneath its lethal flora:} \\
\text{A Beanie Baby for the best} \\
\text{at learning to restore Ma.} \]

Little time needs be spent on the squat jowls
and appraising agility and anger of George Davis,
Cognitive Behavioral Dialectician Delectable.

Doctor Davis:
I gathered that time was not dilating around me, so much as it was
being raggedly overparsed.
Time being held on to
till time was obviously bored with it,
you were obviously bored with it.
Perhaps I even began to be bored of it.

Your spectacles are thin. Are you skeptical?

I tried to make a shrink of you and you a man of me
and your advice is the kind I give most freely.

This is what I said to you, in your office:

\[ \text{Dr. Davis, let's pick a daisy:} \\
\text{You have free will,} \\
\text{You have free will,} \\
\text{You have free will,} \\
\text{You have free will.} \]

I have free will?
Oh look, it isn't a daisy anymore.
Do you think it might like to marry me?
Avraham Bartel you fucking animal, you Theodore Fucking Roosevelt fart-propelled from hell.

I don’t care how witty you are, I’m the one with the feelings to be witty about. I’m participating. My mother is the bag of chemo in the scene where she makes me with my wet-nosed dad—remember I said. You said they broke the mold when they made me. Your smile holds my future: is it disgust, hope, pity?

You gave me some shitty advice, my friend. I could’ve been LACUNA. That effortless night, when she and I LACUNA blood unhemmed LACUNA her dulcet, frightened appeal met with a grating ventriloquism of your median psychodevelopmental bathos-koans. We LACUNA Bartel, dazzled by the showmanship of your normalcy, my Bow Tie God: does the Bow Tie spin or is it the universe? Leash of Leashes, LACUNA, my Seratonin Moses: churning open and bloodying the deltas in which swim the eels of my sleep with the iridescent powders of your faith LACUNA LACUNA

II.

Brave Stan Possick.

Behold a forehead teaching me sympathy.

Behold the burden become the honor

of the recognition of another light in the world.

How can light see light, Brave Stan Possick?

The light that comes from seeing light,

that composes in the face of other light:

this is not the stuff of our physic.

You have defended me from me when I needed it.

But have told me to be clear.

But have told me to be honest.

You are not just blown into this rock:
I filled you with a fish tank of undying love,
invisible to anyone.
The fish will need no light, and grow flexing and firm,
and have their own light, and the net of your light
they will see you inverted,
revealed to them the redolent mechanics
of a face capable of perfect love.
And they will play in the little bath-temples of your eyes.
The contents of your stone head
will be the world if I had been born in your basket,
plunked down there with all my loved ones.
Andrew is there too, with a big blue tail he’s proud of.

A POEM BY MAX FROM SAD DR. POSSICK TO MAX

"I will never stop missing you, even when we go nowhere.
I will never stop missing you, even when you go, nowhere.
I will never stop missing you even when I go nowhere."
SHIELD

TRANSLATED FROM THE OLD ENGLISH BY ORLANDO HERNÁNDEZ
Ic eom anhaga iserne wund,
bille gebennod, beadwoerca sed,
egcum wérig. Oft ic wig sëo
frëcne feohtan. Frôre ne wëne,
haet më géoc cyne gnôgewinnes,
ær ic mid yldum eal forweorde,
ac mec hrossiaô homera láfa,
heardeg heoroscearp homweorc smîpa
bitaô in burgum; ic abidand seal
lâpran gemôtes. Nêtre lêecyçan
on folstede findan meahte,
þara þe mid wyrtum wunde gehelde,
ac më eça dolg eacen weorðaô
þurh déadlöge dagum ond nihtum.

Alone, wounded by iron, wounded
by the sword, replete with the deeds of battle,
I am weary of edges. I know what it's like
to be right in the thick of it. I don't expect help,
that I'll be relieved of these pressures
before perishing, the marks of hammers
striking me, hard-edged, sword-sharp handwork
pierces each fortified place; I have to wait for
a more hateful meeting. Never a doctor
on the battlefield—not for me—
who healed gashes with herbs,
but for me the edge-wounds grow larger
through the deathblow, day and night.

Source: Introduction to Old English, third edition, by Peter S. Baker.
SECTION TWO
NONFICTION
HICCOUGHS

ALEX CHITUC
IN GENESEO, THE SUN SETS SO BRIGHTLY THAT THE light reflects off of the buildings and sidewalks and windows, so, for a few minutes each day, everything is vivid pink and orange. The walls of my dorm room were white, but the lights were off, so when the light seeped in around the blinds, my room was pink, too. I was in bed, my mother in a chair at my feet. My glasses were on my desk, so it took me a moment to realize that she was crying.

I had gone to Student Health earlier that day, but they were rationing antibiotics, so even though I had an ear infection, they sent me away with some Tylenol and a heating pad. When I made it back to my room, I spent the next two hours either screaming or crying while holding a heating pad to my ear, until, to my relief, my eardrum burst open. A few days after this, the left side of my face was paralyzed. The infection had eaten through a bone and had inflamed a nerve and all that Student Health could do was wait until the inflammation died and I could use that half of my face again. For three weeks, I was winking.

But back in my pink dorm room, I asked my mother what was wrong. She wiped her eyes using her fingertips, each hand sliding across her nose past her cheeks, and said it was because her son was bleeding from his ear and there was nothing that she could do about it.

“So?” I asked, and she walked up to me and touched my face and told me that I would understand when I had children of my own. I was nineteen, then.

When I was eleven and we were on vacation to Niagara Falls, I caught my mother smoking. She cried and promised to quit and said that I mustn’t, under any circumstances, tell either of my brothers because they didn’t know. After that, I caught her at least twice a year, and each time received that exact same speech.

Once, when I was fourteen, I was sitting in the kitchen arguing with my mother about smoking. She said that the real reason she couldn’t quit was that she couldn’t bear living and was too much of a coward to kill herself conventionally. I never wondered then, why she would tell a fourteen year old something like that. But sometime after this, at the Chinese buffet, I started crying and my mother took me into the hall near the bathrooms and I told her that I was going to tell my brothers. She was furious. We returned to the table and, as I prepared to say something, my mother said, “Who here doesn’t know that I smoke?” After looking for anyone else to say something, my brothers and I realized that we each thought we were the only one who knew.

So I didn’t think it was strange when, at sixteen, she told me not to tell my brothers or absolutely anyone that she had cancer. After explaining my failures as a son and human being in general, she said that I would be lucky if she saw me graduate high school. I had experimented
with marijuana and would stay up late and spend too much time on the computer and only had a little bit better than a 92 overall average in my classes and she needed to see me on the right track before she died.

We didn’t have health insurance. She hadn’t even seen a doctor to be diagnosed, but she had been bleeding from her colon for five years, she said, which is two years short of how long her father bled from his colon before he died. My mother was dying, soon, and she wouldn’t say another word about it.

My bedroom window led to my roof, which was a nice place to sit because we lived in the country so the view was pretty, and a willow tree hung over half of it. I sat out there often. The stars are bright in the country, and it was best to watch them in the spring when the skies were clear and the winds were calm, and I could hear the crickets and frogs because there was a pond near the woods.

When I was seventeen, I smoked my first cigarette. I was in the backseat of my friend’s car on the way to another friend’s trailer, where I was to sleep on the floor. It was a Camel Light. I declined it at first because it was the middle of the swim season, but my friend said that if there was ever a time for a cigarette, it was after your mother had thrown you out of the house. His argument made sense at the time.

I hadn’t felt like going to school that morning, and my mother said that if I didn’t go, I couldn’t go to my girlfriend’s winter formal. I said that I wouldn’t miss it and that I was going back to bed. She said that if I went to the dance I shouldn’t come back. I went anyway, and came back too, and was promptly shoved back out. I was gone for four days.

Years passed. When I was twenty I transferred out of SUNY Geneseo and into Yale, where my twin had been since freshman year. Two years later and after years of her not dying of cancer, I was convinced that she was just crazy, because she was. There were much likelier explanations for bleeding from the colon. She didn’t have cancer but thought that she did, and since she was never diagnosed by a doctor, she was obviously wrong. When I mentioned this theory to my brother, he said, “What the hell do you mean ‘cancer’?”

After mentioning that conversation to my mother, she eventually said that she had lied. When I asked why she would do something like that, she said, emotionlessly, “We’ve certainly gotten along better since, haven’t we?” After that, we didn’t talk for almost a year. We still don’t, really.

I do remember, though, the summer before all of this that I stayed home to spend time with her, we had gone into Ithaca for the day with my older brother. After eating a nice lunch at an Italian restaurant, we went to Cayuga Lake, where the three of us walked to the edge of the water. I took off my sandals and perched on a rock and
started to skip stones. My mother was impressed by how well I could do it, and she inched to a rock next to mine, sat down, and dipped her ankles in the water. All of her stones sank immediately, so she began handing them to me, one by one, and I would skip them. We did this for a while, and the sun was shining and there were willow trees behind us and it was warm, and suddenly my mother laughed, which sounded like a child’s hiccough, two quick and sudden bursts, and I noticed how rare a sound that was.
SECTION THREE
ART
UNTITLED

TOBIAS KIRCHWEY
TONDO LANDSCAPE

KATE LIEBMAN
SCHOOLGIRLS IN SNOW (TOCHAL)

LUCA LUM
SECTION FOUR
INTERVIEW
THE WORLD IS NEVER SIMPLY ONE THING

AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY KUSHNER
TONY KUSHNER IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT playwrights of his generation. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, a 6-hour play in two parts centered on the AIDS crisis in New York City. In addition to numerous other plays, Kushner has written the book for a Broadway musical, *Caroline, or Change*, and the teleplay for an adaptation of *Angels in America* that aired on HBO in 2003. He co-authored, with Eric Roth, the screenplay for *Munich*, and was nominated this year for an Oscar for his screenplay *Lincoln*, an account of the passage of the 13th Amendment based on Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*. We spoke over the phone in early March, for about an hour and a half, about Kushner's relationship to the poet James Merrill, about politics and art, about the reaction to *Lincoln*, and about the state of gay culture. Kushner speaks at a fast clip, restlessly, joyfully, with ample rubato. During our talk he was constantly skeptical of his own pronouncements on the state of culture or art in general.

LIT In your lists of influences and predecessors we often see Brecht and others, but we never see James Merrill, who seems like he might have been important to you.

T.K. Absolutely. Specifically *The Changing Light at Sandover*. I admire a lot of his poetry but I read each book of *Changing Light at Sandover* as it came out. I suppose it had a formative effect on the text in terms of the origins of it, and there was a point at which it was enormously influential on the “Anti-Migratory Epistle.” And I’m sure that there are lots of specifics that I’ve lost track of but I wouldn’t—I don’t want to say anything disrespectful—Merrill is not a poet that I return to often. I finished *Sandover* when the last book came out and have not returned to it since. So when I talk about writers that I feel that I’m in constant conversation with, I don’t think I’ve ever included Merrill. Politically I think we’re rather different, and his poetry in general tends to cultivate a kind of exquisiteness that is ultimately, for me, not the most exciting thing in poetry.

He was a genuinely important poet, though, and *Sandover* is something that I should probably acknowledge as having had an effect. It gave me a certain permission to turn to the supernatural. One of the intriguing things about Merrill’s poem is that at any moment when you think that you’re meant to take it metaphorically, he assures you that you’re not, that this actually happened, that it actually caused David Jackson to have a tumor in his hand, and so on. There was an actual invasion of sorts. And part of the difficulty when I was writing *Angels*, and it’s always been a difficulty—a lot of people would like to have been William Blake, and at the same time I’m very, very grateful that I’m not William Blake. There’s
a difficulty to grappling with anything metaphysical in a serious way when you’re actually without any direct experience of the metaphysical.

**LIT** You mentioned a sort of exquisiteness to his poetry. What do you think of, in general, as the better alternative to exquisiteness?

**T.K.** Shakespeare.

Well, it's sort of unfair to say that any poet should live up to those standards. There's a difference between beauty and exquisiteness—a certain sort of straining towards an effect and a mistaken idea that beauty and truth actually are identical, and that if you find beauty you’ve found truth.

The formalism of Merrill’s verse is very impressive, although he’s one of the oddest rhymers in the English language. It's an incredibly meticulous rhyming that almost doesn’t have the music of rhyme. There’s almost a fastidiousness to it, which in a certain way almost kills the music. There are some passages of real beauty and majesty, but there’s an awful lot of going, wait a minute, this is rhyming, this is perfectly metered, but it's not hitting me.

**LIT** That's the weirdest part of this whole thing, that we have these Ouija transcripts but they’re in iambic pentameter—that these spirits from the other world speak in meter.

**T.K.** That’s part of the game that he's playing with the reader. You’re not receiving simply a transcript. He makes it fairly clear that there are two mediums: there’s David Jackson and his hand and the cup and the board, and then there’s also James Merrill. There’s a message being delivered through the board and there’s a message being delivered through the verse and the poetry and the commentary. It’s kind of Midrashic in that sense: there’s a text and a commentary.

I think one of the things that I borrowed from Sandover is the capitalized words. As I was reading it I was thinking, if you were reading this out loud, what would you do when you got to those capitals? Would you just yell everything? Is he playing with volume? Or is it meant to be graphological rather than aural? Are they meant to look like graven words on an entablature or is it meant to sound louder because it’s in caps? And when I started working on the Angels text I thought it would be fun to see what actors did with that—if they just yelled everything. It's a very difficult part of the play to get right.

**LIT** You hear echoes of Merrill’s angels, specifically, in the angel of Angels in America. Like the way Michael speaks in Sandover—Michael goes, “I, I, I,” over and over again.

**T.K.** I had definitely forgotten that, so, well, there you go.
I think that the idea that they are corporate beings is Aquinas, and it actually goes all the way back to Ezekiel. Every time my angel refers to herself with the first person pronoun it’s four of them, because she’s actually four beings in one. She’s not a single entity, she’s an aggregate entity. That’s been part of the angelological lore for a very long time, that you can’t really think of them as being singular beings. In the Holy Scriptures, and also in Revelations, they frequently appear as weird things: wheels of fire, and myriads of eyes, multiple wings, multiple heads. They’re not human beings with wings, they’re something else. There’s a lot of this in Rilke, too, who clearly has an influence on Merrill.

LIT

You said before that beauty, and beauty in art, is very different than truth. That would seem to suggest that there could be a tension in making art that is aimed at having a political effect. You’d expect so-called political art to be directed at truth, to expose truth, to tell people truth, and you’d expect beautiful art to be doing something other. Does that tension exist for you?

The reason I ask is that there are certain moments in your work that, very uniquely and very refreshingly, seem to have a somewhat directive tone to them. And seem aimed at helping the reader, the viewer, whomever, to, say, participate in the democracy— I’m thinking specifically of the end of Angels in America, the coda, the epilogue, or even sort of the timing of Lincoln, nowadays, which a lot of people have read as a commentary on compromise.

T.K.

People are really and seriously wrong about Lincoln, that’s a misunderstanding of the film. I don’t know if I’d call it a commentary, but the film certainly comes out of my understanding of a national conversation that we’re having. The people on the right who are saying that it’s a film about bipartisanship and compromise are basically just trying to disguise the fact that Lincoln was a big government, tax-and-spend liberal who had nothing whatsoever to do with the modern Republican party, and would be appalled at the way that they’re behaving. The people on the left who say that it’s a film pushing the idea of compromise, I think they’re basically misunderstanding that he doesn’t pass the amendment through any kind of compromise. There’s no compromise, they don’t make it a partially anti-slavery amendment, it abolishes slavery in the United States plain and simple. It’s about not compromising but it’s about the incredibly inelegant and awkward and sometimes torturous ways of the democratic process. And an affirmation, I think, of a very deep belief I have that the processes of electoral democracy can accomplish radical revolutionary transformation. If Lincoln is misunderstood as a compromiser and a capitulator, he’s actually a figure of revolutionary transformation— something that Karl Marx seemed to understand but that we’ve lost track of.
I’ve been intrigued and amused and sometimes annoyed at the way that people are reading the film. I think there’s a resistance to it. I consider myself part of the left, and I’m very frustrated, and have been for a very long time, with the left’s rejection of the very idea of government. I’m not an anarchist, I don’t believe anarchism works or makes sense. I think it’s a childish idea. The way that the left in this country abandoned the possibility of transformation of society through electoral democracy, in favor of juvenile ideas of spontaneous anarchist revolution, has been catastrophic for this country, for the planet. So there’s that in *Lincoln*.

What you originally asked me: I think that there are moments in a work of art where things that are simple and clear truths can be uttered and have a real impact. They always take me a little bit by surprise, like in *Angels in America* when Hannah Pitt and Prior Walter are in the emergency room together and it’s the fourth act and she says, You won’t make assumptions about me and I won’t make them about you. I always thought, when I wrote that line, I like that she’s saying this, but it’s a little corny, and it’s always had a discernibly strong impact in it’s moment in the theater—people are moved by it. There’s a great line in Brecht’s last poem: And I always thought the simplest words must be enough, you’ll go down if you don’t stand up for yourself, surely you see that. There are places where, for all of Brecht’s immensely clever dialectical spin, it’s very blunt and direct statements that have an impact.

I think that those moments, if they’re chosen carefully, are significant—but I think that they work because the rest of the play, the context in which they’re embedded, is delivering on a much deeper, more complicated level. And to open the heart to certain fundamental truths that we all know, and sometimes, or frequently, fail to speak in public places with sincerity, and when the play is really working and everybody is feeling a kind of collective openness and vulnerability and a lack of protected skepticism, those statements really can have a tremendous impact. But alone, they would simply seem bromidic. I don’t think they’d have the impact in the work. In Proust, there are these absolutely devastatingly moving moments—but the power of the devastation comes because of the vast complex apparatus that surrounds them.

So I think it’s true that you can make direct statements and have a direct impact, and a really complicated work of art can have a direct impact, but the thing that gives those direct statements power is something that’s going on underneath that’s much looser and less directional. It’s what Shakespeare says: the relationship of the unconscious to the dreamer, the deal that’s being made—that you can, if you choose, forget everything that you’ve seen, or remember it years later, or interpret it in any way you
want, or confront it in all of its realness and unrealness, but you have a freedom to understand or misunderstand or forget what you’ve been shown, and that freedom is a part of the power of the work. It requires your participation. It’s not just advising you. It requires your participation, your active participation in the business of understanding it, and that energy becomes part of its meaning.

LIT You talked a little bit just now about—you used the word corniness, you used the word skepticism. There’s a lot of anxiety in the air right now—it seems to be particularly pronounced within my generation; that might just be my own bias—but there’s a lot of anxiety specifically about irony, even around the word irony, too. You see editorials in the Times now about how we should be less ironic, or more ironic, or less ironic—or more fundamentalist, one of them even said. It seems to be concentrated specifically around Brooklyn, around “hipsters,” around questions of taste and how much we’re going to worry about our own taste.

T.K. There are a lot of different things that you’re describing. Of course, after 9/11, there was an immediate announcement that irony was dead, and that’s of course nonsensical. The world is never simply one thing. The most important point in every epistemological breakthrough that the human race has made is always, to some degree or another, centered around this discovery, that you can’t read the world fundamentally—I mean literally like a fundamentalist tries to read the Bible. That you simply become a fool if you do this, that the world produces meaning and the meanings are always internally contradictory and dialectical and paradoxical, and that is simply, as Wallace Steven says, that the honey of earth both comes and goes at once. And there’s no escaping that condition.

I feel like I was caught up in this in kind of an irritating and ugly way with Lincoln, and the whole question of whether historical fiction has to be exactly adherent to historical fact. You can’t discuss these things in soundbites, which is the only thing that was ever permitted during the whole awards season. Underneath all of that, I thought, was a very weird and alarming anxiety about fiction and art itself and a misunderstanding. It was almost as if you were talking to a three-your-old who was shocked to learn that the bedtime story that they were being told wasn’t actually true. But, of course, if you can’t engage with the artifice of a work of art—that hope do you have of engaging with the artifice of constructs like money and language and human society? You can’t read anything literally. That’s just to say that you’re not reading well.

There are all sorts of ways to interpret that and I don’t like engaging in large-scale cultural criticism because I always feel like you’re dealing with phenomena that
are infinitely vast and multiform and heterogeneous in terms of their origins, so I feel like you’re always simplifying and being glib, but one thing that occurs is the old Marxist line: the basic gesture of capitalism is commodity fetishism, to disguise that which is artificial as natural and to present what is dialectical as one-dimensional. Once again it’s a little bit old-fashioned and corny but there’s a great deal of truth to that. We develop more and more anxiety about confronting the artificial and embracing the artificial and playing games with the artificial and begin to engage in a desperate search for films that are not in any way artificial, which is preposterous. It’s images captured on pixels or tape or something, so of course it’s artificial.

I think that one conceivable origin of this anxiety is that as we become more and more cyborg, as we become more and more convinced of the illusion of infinite power and infinite options and immortality the marketplace and technology sells us, the more anxious we become about anything that suggests that underneath the surface appearance of immortality and eternity and omnipotence is just a lot of human relationships and a lot of fucked-up shit that has to do with people being oppressed and people benefiting from oppressing people and so on and so forth, property relations and so on. I think there are a number of ways of reading this.

I’m now 56 years old and I’m determined not to become a cranky old man who says, “The kids these days don’t do this, and they don’t do that,” and I also like Brecht’s maxim that the bad new things are always better than the good old things. I think you sort of have to believe that on some level. So I don’t want to say your generation is this or your generation is that. The one thing that I feel that people are nervous about, that they see, is a kind of air-quotes quality—which is an anxiety about doubleness. It feels to me that there’s a degree of defensiveness in it, of an anxiety about being a fool, about being fooled.

LIT And that’s not exactly a real irony, either, in a deep sense.

T.K. Well, no, exactly, it’s a prophylactic against irony, it’s against doubleness. It’s a warding off of being a dupe by automatically announcing that you don’t believe in anything.

But it feels to me that one aspect of it is a manifestation of the fact that people are growing up in a world that simply feels too menacing. I think there is a kind of terrorism directed at the young in the form of facts and news and information. My generation and the boomer generation came of age in a time when nuclear holocaust was first beginning to be contemplated, but it hadn’t really sunk in. And that seems quaint and manageable now compared to climate change, which is an infinitely more terrifying threat, and on top of climate change, there’s the
thirty-year Reaganite project of destroying not only the social net that was constructed during the Great Society but also reaching back to the New Deal and undoing all institutional guarantees and actually going beyond that and undoing the fundamental bonds that hold society itself together. There's a profound ego-anarchism at work at the heart of the libertarian side of the political right. For the last thirty years, things that typically would have made you unelectable—to stand up like Rand Paul does and constantly refer to the government of the United States as a beast on the floor of the U.S. Senate—this would have been absolutely impossible to do thirty years ago. And it's now not even noticed.

This is a huge change, if you grow up in an environment like that where you're really guaranteed nothing and your parents have clearly not succeeded in improving on the wealth of their parents and will leave you nothing. And if you're poor, and no one in your family has ever left anybody anything, your hopes of moving ahead, of moving up, or moving into a more secure kind of life, are going to seem somewhat immaterial or impossible given the fact that you can see around you that there's no such thing as upward mobility anymore. The only thing that's moving in our society is the wealth of our society migrating to the top one percent of the pyramid. In those circumstances, I think people become very concerned about their own survival. People become very protective. And I think it manifests itself in, you know, graduate seminars, where students become increasingly less willing to speak up and offer an idea that may be idiotic and get laughed at for it because it becomes too costly to be vulnerable in that way. You can't be intellectually vulnerable if you're really sitting in terror of what your life is going to turn into when you leave academia because nobody's getting work. I think these things really have a tremendously destructive impact, and I don't think that anybody plans them consciously, but there's a social agreement about what's important that ideology shapes. That is what ideology is, in a way. Our society has agreed that making young people feel as secure as young people need to feel in the future is not really very important. And in agreeing to that we're agreeing to some really horrible things about what we want for our society.

LIT  It's a huge pessimism.

T.K.  Well, it becomes that. And every year interesting new playwrights emerge, and interesting new screenwriters and directors emerge, and people who are taking up the work at hand and moving things forward. I see a lot of introspection and self-questioning in people a good deal younger than myself.

In a way, what your generation is fighting against is what everyone's fighting against. We've lost faith in
metatheories, we've had very good reason to become very skeptical about large scale plans for the future and any theory that claims to be of value as a prescription in terms of the road ahead. There’s great legitimacy in that. We’ve had the twentieth century to show us how far astray sometimes we can go if we follow grand theory. But without them, it becomes enormously difficult to organize human energy collectively in one direction or another and you frequently wind up with people for whom veganism, or reducing your carbon footprint, becomes the only form of historical agency that seems in any way legitimate.

We also have the challenge of the internet, which creates the possibility of a sort of virtual activism that has enormous value, obviously, and also has a kind of built-in incoherence because virtual communities are not real communities. There’s something that happens on the surface of the skin, or between the surface of one person’s skin and the surface of another person’s skin, when they’re in the same place. There’s a smell of a crowded room of people arguing for something. It’s different than sitting at your desk. So you see in a phenomenon like Arab Spring the immense power of the internet to galvanize movements and also a kind of unknowability and proximate political miasma that is a function of the fact that the internet is visiting a kind of a ghostly and confusing communal experience on an actual communal experience. It’s a tricky thing to negotiate.

LIT

A lament is starting to be taken up now for gay culture. There’s this idea that, again, my generation is going to lose a certain kind of gay identity, and besides that a certain body, a certain gay cultural canon, now that politically we’ve come so far forward.

T.K.

Well, I don’t think there’s anything to be done. One of those absolute reliables in history is that when a movement struggling for liberation or freedom or emancipation begins to arrive at at least one destination, or begins to feel that it’s really made tremendous progress, and our movement certainly has, a great deal of life and death pressures—identity is created, as is true in individuals in a way that it isn’t in groups, a lot of identity is created through trauma, and a lot of political identity is created through oppression, and reaction to oppression, and I think it’s important to remember that. All identity has some degree of trauma and pain and suffering in its origins. And because human beings are the extraordinary things that they are, we create spectacular cultures that are partly created in a kind of defensive response, but then gain their own internal splendor. And there’s a tragedy, absolutely, when, in the possibility of internationalism and universality, we want connectedness, we want to break down walls and boundaries—I don’t think
anybody but crazy people really ultimately want a tribal world—but you lose a great deal of cultural specificity, and to the extent that identity formation gives you power, you lose a certain degree of—you trade one kind of power for another kind of power in the same way that you trade absolute freedom, which is always ultimately illusory, because somebody stronger comes along and takes your freedom away, you trade that freedom for submission to law and submission to law can give you freedoms that you wouldn’t have were you actually completely living in an outlaw, anarchic world. So there are these trade-offs.

And I think that there’s no answer to it. The only real answer is an engagement with history and an understanding of the political valence, the political significance of remembering. That memory is not just a way of becoming coherent internally, that memory, cultural memory, is also a way of making sense of where you are. If you’re a young lesbian or a gay man or a transgender person, you’ve arrived at a place where you even have these names because of a struggle, the generations before you, and some aspect of their culture is available to you and you can always dress up and play sulky-shadowy-gay-bar-in-the-nineteen-fifties if that turns you on.

And you hope that as things become more and more universal, there’s also always a faster rate of multiplication, of fragmentation. More and more sub-identities emerge and that’s part of how these things reconstitute themselves, it seems.

T.K. I think that’s really true, and I think that there’s a danger in clinging to the notion of outsider status. I don’t think there’s any way that people are not going to do that, there are people who are going to find it sexy to be despised, like Leo Bersani who claimed that that misery is actually the whole point of it, that homosexuality is an antisocial rejection. There are people who welcome that, I think that that’s nonsense. For most people, the trade-off is a legitimate one: the agony—I know too many people in their seventies and eighties who really lived at a time when to be openly gay was not impossible, but something that could have had only a tremendous cost—and for most people that’s not of great interest. And I think there is something enormously powerful in the impulse towards solidarity, towards connectedness. The solidarity of the oppressed for the oppressed, as Brecht says, is the world’s one hope. (I don’t know why I’m quoting so much Brecht today.) I think that there is an absolute human imperative in building community and in expanding community and communities that don’t expand ossify and die and become perverted and monstrous.

Part of the reason people have so much trouble with this is that people are designed to have trouble with loss, that’s how we build community. We are creatures of con-
nection. And as creatures of connection, losing anything is agony. The loss of cultural specificity, even if it’s shtetl culture, even if it’s ghetto culture, if it’s something that was formed in the most terrifying and appalling circumstances, or closet culture, it has a beauty and it’s gone, and we grieve it. And that’s sort of what you have to do—you mourn it, and you remember it. You keep it alive, you keep it dynamic, you do what Freud says, you mourn it successfully by developing an ambiguous relationship to it—you keep it alive while at the same time recognizing it as gone forever. And you struggle with that, there’s no way to be happy entirely with it. But you also don’t try and preserve it by pulling the wagons tighter and tighter and saying we are a people distinct in ourselves and we will always be this. Because it doesn’t take any imagination at all to see where that leads and it’s never ended any place good at all.

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