9-2021

Some Notes On Birds: Language and Attention in the Age of Social Media

Aimee Lamoureux
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

SOME NOTES ON BIRDS:

LANGUAGE AND ATTENTION IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL

MEDIA

by

AIMEE LAMOUREUX

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

The Some Notes On Birds:

Language and Attention in the Age of Social Media

by

Aimee Lamoureux

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

_____   _____

Date   Wayne Koestenbaum

                                               Thesis Advisor

_____   _____

Date   Elizabeth Macaulay

                                               Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Some Notes On Birds:

Language and Attention in the Age of Social Media

by

Aimee Lamoureux

Advisor: Wayne Koestenbaum

Technology, social media, and its affiliated distractions are now an ever-present part of our daily lives. Attention is a commodity, one which tech companies value because it delivers them bigger and bigger profits. Their products are intentionally designed to be additive, to demand more and more of our time and attention throughout our day. However, attention is not simply a commodity, but the way in which we connect with the external world and attend to our everyday experience. The world that we create in the mind is the world that ends up forming the reality of our everyday lives. Complex language is the tool that enables us to engage in the abstract, high-order thinking that directs our attention, to conceive of the passage of time, and therefore construct a narrative out of our lives and a cohesive understanding of our own identities. The cultivation of our attention, then, is not an arbitrary task, but the focused work of the mind, one that requires a good deal of effort. When we cede control of our attention to these distractions, we allow these companies greater and greater control over our very minds and selves. The boundaries that determined our social behavior were once physical, but electronic communication has largely erased these boundaries, creating a new type of social life, in which one must perform for a variety of different audiences at all times. This new type of social life has created a flat kind of identity, in which people engage in a type of online performance, but do little to cultivate authentic relationships or a strong, cohesive identity independent of others' perception of them online.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I once gave someone I loved very much a book of birds. He loved birds, would point them out to me on our long walks, stopping on our hikes to catch a glimpse of tiny wings flitting through the trees. I didn't care about birds, was bored by them. I did not even pretend to care.

But I did care about him, and so I carried back with me a copy of *Audubon's Birds of America: The National Audubon Society Baby Elephant Folio* from the North Carolina Museum of Art, in which I had once escaped an afternoon of brutal July heat. In the summer of 2019, the museum had featured an exhibit on John James Audubon's magnum opus, *The Birds of America*. It boasted possession of one of only 200 full sets of Audubon's detailed hand-colored engravings, recently rebound in four leather portfolios and displayed "in special cases designed for each of the enormous 'double elephant' volumes, with hydraulic lifts that allow staff access so that the pages can be turned periodically to display a new selection of birds" ("Exhibitions").

In a press release, the museum's director, Valerie Hillings, PhD. announced: "We're thrilled to have the beloved Audubon folios back on view...Audubon's work captures the beauty and wonder of nature while also highlighting that it is subject to change over time. Many of the birds in the folios are now extinct, so The Birds of America and The Audubon Experience take the visitor on a journey to the past" ("John James Audubon's The Birds of America Returns to View").

A brief journey to early 19th century America will tell us that John James Audobon, the father of the famed Audubon Society, was an outdoorsman, a hunter, and an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of London. He was also a killer. Far from an environmental protectionist, Audubon's modus operandi was to shoot his targets with a fine buck shot, and string their corpses up into lifelike positions with metal wire, before rendering them eternal in life sized paintings. His biographer, William Souder, wrote "at one time or another, Audubon killed specimens of all

but a handful of the more than four hundred species of birds he ultimately painted" (qtd. in Perry par. 5). His exquisite portraits captured the essence of the creature only after death. Were it not for his methods, his artistic creations might have never been so beautiful, so perfectly lifelike.

"I see the bird," was my older brother's first complete sentence. It is a story my mother likes to repeat, recounting how he saw the tiny speck of darkness fluttering in the distant sky from his car seat. He has been seeing birds since before I was born. I did not see a bird until I was 26 years old. There were simply no birds in the city I used to live in. There were pigeons, but I thought of them, like many city people, as merely extensions of rats, only with wings. There were the small, brown, twittering creatures that sometimes clustered around the scattered crumbs and spilled food that was ever-present on city sidewalks. I never saw them. I never looked at them, and I certainly did not name them.

The first time I saw a bird was in the early spring of 2020. The birds were flying back north, nature was, as people were joking then, healing, and the world was grappling - clumsily and ineffectively, at least within our borders - with the novel Coronavirus pandemic that had shut down the whole world. The bird could not be missed. It was huge, and tawny, and so jarringly out of place, even in the out of the way section of the city where I spent my long afternoons running, that it demanded one's attention. It all but forced one to look. At the age of 26, I finally saw the bird.

It was, fittingly, a bird of prey. A red-tailed hawk, gorgeous and threatening, perched on the edge of a guardrail, watching the droves of people pass by, utterly unperturbed by their proximity to its magnificent presence. It stayed in that same spot for a remarkably long time, long enough for me to remember its distinct markings and text the man to whom I had gifted *Audubon's Birds of America* a description of the bird. I wanted to know what it was I had seen,

but I could not truly know it until I knew its name. He told me the name - *red-tailed hawk* - and so began our correspondence of birds. As I saw them, I would relay their markings back to him, and he would return to me with their proper names. The more birds I described, the more birds I saw, and the more birds I saw, the easier it became to distinguish between each one. Soon, on my daily runs, my attention was captured by every flitting little thing, the brown sparrows, the risky red cardinals, the chickadees sporting their proper-looking hats, the orioles with their bold orange streaks.

As the spring and summer went on, I was no longer "lacking a cognitive or linguistic representation of [the] concept" of the many birds of the northeast and their colorings, notes, and habits (Wu and Dunning 25). Because "it is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection," learning the names that corresponded to each individual bird did more than just allow me to expand my vocabulary - it expanded my perception of the reality I lived in (Sapir 209). These "finite conceptional horizons are a pervasive and powerful constrain on how [one] makes[s] sense of the world. These horizons represent the hard boundaries of where people's possible interpretation of their circumstances can go…if people base their interpretations of their circumstances upon readily available cognitive frameworks, the frameworks one does not have limit the scope of which understandings are possible" (Wu and Dunning 25). The boundaries of my limited framework had rendered me unable to pay attention to the birds that had been all around me, but as my language expanded, so did my ability to attend to parts of my everyday reality that had heretofore been invisible to me.

In his own elegant description of nature, Wallace Stevens asks:

O thin men of Haddam,

Why do you imagine golden birds?

Do you not see how the blackbird

Walks around the feet

Of the women about you? ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird")

Much like Steven's thin men of Haddam, I had not seen the birds that had always been walking around me. Rather, lacking the expansive linguistic framework, I was blind to the birds. I never knew the names of the birds, and so I had never truly seen them. But all that spring and summer, as the birds returned from their winter homes, I began to notice the trilling songbirds, and to learn their names.

Armed as I finally was with the correct language, I felt myself to be in possession of some sort of "unlawful magic," because "what a great part, in magic, *words* have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names, he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name" (James, "What Pragmatism Means" 5-6). It was no coincidence that I found solace in the act of categorizing, identifying, and naming aspects of the natural world during a time when the churning events of an uncertain universe rendered me - rendered us all - powerless in the face of its indifferent cruelty. While of course the birds would not bend to my will, naming them did return to me some sort of power. I was the "poet...the Namer, or Language-maker...giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby

rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary" (Emerson, "The Poet" 13). It is because "every word was once a poem," that even the act of simply learning the names of the birds allowed me to access some "dream-power...a power transcending all limit" that connected me more closely to the world around me (Emerson, "The Poet" 11, 23). The names were not mere information, but an "insight...a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucid to others...The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that" (Emerson, "The Poet" 15). It was a time of a "deepening need of words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience...makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search for the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is within the acutest poet to give them...words are thoughts and not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is that they are thinking, must be conscious of this: that, above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are in poetry, sounds" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 32).

Language is so ubiquitous that it is easy to ignore its essential power, easy to forget that "the practice of putting thoughts into words alters the nature of human experience" (Clark 13). The human experience begins, first, in sensation, and it continues that way, through cravings and immediate bodily experiences, as hunger, or cold, or fright. These bodily experiences persist throughout our lives, but once we are able to articulate them, we are able to turn these experiences from pure sensation into a conscious, vocalized need. Without this ability to experience conscious restraint, we would forever be the victim of our constant corporeal desires,

eternal slaves to the most base and animalistic of our physical demands. By articulating our needs, we are able to subsume the immediacy of our urges into the disciplined self-consciousness that enables us to move into the realm of advanced, abstract thought. Complex language is what makes humans unlike any other species, and yet, before we are capable of the abstract thought it allows, we must first develop the most basic building blocks of language-making - that is, sounds.

At its core, language is pure sound and syntax, which is why we must learn sound and rhythm before we learn anything else. As very young children, sound is the first thing we make, as the very early precursor to words. Children may scream, or babble, or string together basic word patterns, but "the string of sounds belongs not yet to meaningful speech but to song...first learned, last lost, musical strings...will often survive brain injury or deterioration that blocks the usual access to the lexicon. A stroke victim may be able to recover specific time reference, such as 'last Tuesday,' only by first reciting MondayTuesdayWednesdayThursdayFridaySaturdaySunday - the organizing chunk it belongs to...'Chunking' is a normal and widespread brain function, essential to what we think of as human intelligence and to memory" (Voigt 4). This chunking is the first step towards mastering language, and most rudimentary speech has a sing-song quality and pattern not by coincidence, because "music has been fairly defined as organized sound: identifiable elements recur over time. Its hallmark is sufficiently recognizable patterns causing a brain to repeatedly group notes in the same way...that is, it sorts and arranges perception. Organized sound may also fairly define speech...this 'chunking' is the essential work of syntax, and it is how we make meaning: from a rudimentary set of principles...we generate or interpret surface structures of infinite variety that combine, in parsable sequence, words from our acquired lexicons" (Voigt 8-9). This use of

"syntax...the order of the words in each unique human utterance...is a strategy, an arrangement of constituent parts," and it "supplies language most of its similar markers, and we've known many of them since childhood...in language as in music, repetition - whether lexical (the same words) or grammatical (the same function for the words) or syntactical (the same arrangement of the words) - also marks phrases or chunks...The human brain is avid for pattern, by which to register, store, and retrieve information" (Voigt 8, 11).

We are born from whatever prenatal rhythmic pumping of blood and oxygen and life inside the womb, into a world violent with noise and confusion. Chaotic and disorganized, we use language to give shape and structure to the disordered world, and to articulate our desires, wants, and needs to others. A primary function of language is to communicate with other people. As infants, screaming and crying do the most rudimentary work of communication, alerting our caregivers to our needs. As we get older, we do not lose this fundamental need of communication, but we learn to hone it into a far more advanced and nuanced "complex dialectical reality between people" (Hustvedt 55). Language is relational, since it "takes place between people, and it is acquired through others, even though we have the biological equipment necessary to learn it. If you lock a child in a closet, he will not learn to speak...therefore the minimal requirement for a living language is two people" (Hustvedt 55). While my correspondence of birds fulfilled this most basic requirement of communication between two people, it was also representative of another necessary function of language, the use of "linguistic labels for classes of perceptually presented objects," which "invites the network to seek the perceptual commonality" and "may thus enable us to comprehend equivalence classes that would otherwise lie forever outside our intellectual horizons" (Clark 7). The human brain's remarkable capacity to use language is what allows for what the Russian neurologist A. R. Luria

described as "the transition from sensation to thinking, and to the creation of new functional systems. Speech not only gives names to the objects of the outside word; it also distinguishes among their essential properties and includes them in a system of relations to other objects" (qtd. in Hustvedt 57 - 58). For Stevens, it is the ability to

> ...know noble accents
>
> And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
>
> But I know, too,
>
> That the blackbird is involved
>
> In what I know ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird")

While the chaos of reality does not ever go away, we are able to identify what is known by articulating the experience of our reality, so what we see and know is what we are able to name and express to one another and to ourselves through language. Sentence structure, syntactical arrangements, and complex clauses enable the disorganized reality of everyday life to be internally organized, comprehended, and articulated. With speech, connections can be made, consciousness can be ruminated upon, and ideas can be expanded through more advanced thought processes. Language becomes "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality. It seems...to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 36).

　　We graduate into this type of expression first via rudimentary vocabulary, then to a more expansive lexicon, and finally to the advanced communication and comprehension that comes through reading written texts, which "employ...rapid-fire reliance on deeply learned patterns,

which are either fulfilled or resisted. When what we read is written...in words, those patterns are embedded in the syntax of the language" (Voigt xiii). Without language, we would be unable to name and categorize, would be unable to access the past or look towards an abstract future, and the use of narratives with which we use to order the chaos and disorder of lives and create a sense of continuity would be lost. The very process of "linguistic formulation makes complex thoughts available to processes of mental attention...this, in turn opens them up to a range of further mental operations. It enables us, for example, to pick out different elements of complex thoughts and to scrutinize each in turn. It enables us to 'stabilize' very abstract ideas in working memory. And it enables us to inspect and criticize our own reasoning in ways that no other representational modality allows" (Clark 12).

Being able to keep abstract ideas in working memory is what enables us to "modify the brain in a way that can make it easier to learn ideas and skills in the future...With each expansion of our memory comes an enlargement of our intelligence" (Carr 192). There are few things more human than memory, because "biological memory is alive...in a perpetual state of renewal" (Carr 191). It is not simply a blank slate onto which past events are inscribed, but rather "memory involves a reproductive power, and looks ahead involve a creative power: the power of our expectations," and it is made possible through our use of language (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 144). Language enables us to access our past both through internal memory and through the use of written text, through which we are capable of greatly expanding the capacity of our memories beyond what we each can hold in our individual minds. Written text generates "a trace in a format which opens up a range of new possibilities. We can then inspect and re-inspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind. We can hold the original ideas steady so that we may judge them, and safely experiment with

subtle alterations. We can store them in ways which allow us to compare and combine them with other complexes of ideas...as soon as we formulate a thought in words (or on paper), it becomes an object for ourselves and for others. As an object, it is the kind of thing we can have thoughts about...the process of linguistic formulation thus creates the stable structure to which subsequent thinkings attach" (Clark 11- 12). This ability to access the past through words demonstrates why "language is the archives of history...for, though the origins of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer...so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. but the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree" (Emerson, "The Poet" 13).

Language is not simply a tool for communicating, naming, or record keeping alone. Language is also generative, enabling the formation of new thoughts and new ideas through its very usage. Communicative language and "the real properties of physical text transform the space of possible thoughts...it is public language which is responsible for a complex of rather distinctive features of human thought viz, our ability to display second-order cognitive dynamics...a cluster of powerful capacities involving self-evaluation, self-criticism and finely honed remedial responses...This 'thinking about thinking' is a good candidate for a distinctively human capacity - one not evidently shared by the other, non-language using animals who share our planet" (Clark 12). Language use is the process through which we not only access the thought, but it also plays a "generative role," enabling "a species of thought which is not just reflected in, or extended by, our use of words but is directly dependent upon language for its

very existence. Public language...would...act like the aerial roots of the Mangrove tree - the words would serve as fixed points capable of attracting and positioning additional intellectual matter, creating the islands of second-order thought so characteristic of the cognitive landscape of homo sapiens" (Clark 12). While "it is natural to suppose that words are always rooted in the fertile soil of pre-existing thoughts...sometimes, at least, the influence seems to run in the other direction. A simple example is poetry. In constructing a poem we do not simply use words to express thoughts. Rather, it is often the properties which of the words (their structure and cadence) which determine the thoughts that the poem comes to express" (Clark 11). This is why "we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks or behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene" (Emerson, "The Poet" 19).

The poet, the Language-maker, is empowered to free us from the mundane, petty, and repetitive thoughts that imprison us in our daily lives. Through the skillfully formed and artfully deployed use of words, the poet directs our thoughts away from the invasive distractions of modern life and that which is immediate, demanding, and routine, and turns the mind's focus instead towards a more purposeful form of attention, one in which the reader attends to the world more freely, without a foregone agenda. Using specific language to show us a world that is outside our thoughts, that is other than the world that we are living in right now, and to guide us into a new construction of our own realities creates a "metamorphosis," which "excites...an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men" (Emerson, "The Poet" 17). When using language as such, the poet offers "liberation" and "departure from routine...which puts the world, like a ball, in our hands," so it should come as no surprise that poetry is the language that was best equipped to address the unending drudgery and

fear of the current moment (Emerson, "The Poet" 19). In his poem "Bird-Understander," Craig Arnold described the essential importance of noticing the disruption, of attending to the everyday through language.

> All you can do is notice the bird
>
> and feel for the bird   and write
>
> to tell me how language feels
>
> impossibly useless
>
>
> but you are wrong
>
>
> You are a bird-understander
>
> better than I could ever be
>
> who make so many noises
>
> and call them song

Arnold begins the poem with the line: "Of many reasons I love you here is one." My love, too, was a bird-understander, someone who knew the names and would tell them to me. His language, too, was far from useless. He gave me the language to be able to see the birds as they continued their rituals, migrating north into the epicenter of the virus that spring, oblivious to our catastrophes. Olivia Laing noted in *The Trip to Echo Spring* "nothing except changes in climate and language communicate so thoroughly a sense of travel as the difference in birdlife," and the birds, too, communicated not just the sense of place but a sense of the passage of time (Laing

33). Their movements conveyed a continuance of seasons that was reassuring amidst the chaos. For Stevens:

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds
>
> It was a small part of the pantomime ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird")

My birds, whirling northward in a spring wind, were also but a small part of the "ridiculous or confused situation or event" that we were all living through ("Pantomime").

Indeed, my birds are forever set against the backdrop of a city that was then the epicenter of a virus that swept, all at once, into the very fabric of our everyday lives. Field hospitals were constructed in Central Park and Javits Convention Center to alleviate the overflow of the sick and dying from the city's overworked and overcrowded hospitals. I lived just a few blocks away from a hospital with a white freezer truck parked outside, a disaster morgue cobbled together from a former grocery truck to house the bodies of the dead. The trucks "sat outside nearly all of the city's hospitals, in parking lots, next to parks, outside subway entrances and at four temporary morgue locations," a "part of a nation in grief," *New York Times* writer Gina Cherelus reported in May of 2020 (Ochs and Cherelus). The once teeming, lively streets of New York City were full of strange, frightened, masked people I did not recognize. We saw the trucks, felt the pain of the loss, tried to comprehend the weight of all that was happening, and yet, "the immediate elements of our daily lives, of *today*, [were] with us even in the midst of historical catastrophe and personal tragedy. The everyday is not only full of beauty and meaning; it is also the inescapable, natural foundation of human experience" (Epstein 2). The birds were with us, even as the pandemic raged, and the personal and political tragedies ticked ever higher. from 100,000 to 200,000 to 400,000 to 600,000 personal tragedies.

I had purchased a copy of Laing's book back in late May of 2020, thinking I would now have the time to read all the books I had been meaning to get to but had not yet found the time to read. The prose was beautifully rendered. I deeply admired Laing's thorough research and writing style. I was enjoying the book. Yet I could not finish it. I could not finish it, because I found I could not read. I could not read for pleasure. I could not read for work. I could not read at all.

I was far from alone. I confirmed it through informal polls with people I knew. My roommate, my best friend, even my hairdresser, Sean, all said the same thing. They used to be avid readers. Now they, and I, struggled to get through pages of even light guilty pleasure novels and easy beach reads. Think pieces in fashionable publications like *Vogue* and *Medium* and *Vox* tried to explain the phenomena. They mostly all reached the same simple conclusions: Anxiety, fear, stress. "The pandemic that we're in is the most uncertain thing possible. You don't know when it's going to end, whether you're going to get it. You don't even know what it is, really...It's the most uncertain thing. It's also completely uncontrollable...But what I can do is seek information. I can go on Twitter, I can go on the internet, I can search nonstop, trying to resolve this uncertainty. The problem is that you're never going to actually resolve it...And in the end, you're just promoting this anxiety...So why are people having difficulty concentrating? That's part of the explanation: They're trying to resolve an uncertainty that is unresolvable," Oliver J. Robinson of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London explained to *Vox* (Grady par. 17 - 22). "Research shows that chronic stress affects the way the front of the brain works—the area…[that] normally controls our ability to concentrate and switch attention from one thing to another...we lose our usual mental flexibility and become highly focused on the source of the threat," clinical psychologist Christian Jarrett, PhD, told *Vogue* in

April of 2020 (Vershbow par. 8). Persistent stress and anxiety leads to a lack of concentration, and the constant and steady thrum of the consistently worsening catastrophes outside our doors does not easily lend itself to the simple pleasure of being able to close out the world and enter into a new one, made up only of language.

This seems to be a logical culmination of a decade in which our attention has been consistently demeaned, derailed, and stressed almost to breaking. The modern world has always clamoured for our incessant attention. Indeed, the bulk of the modern economy feeds off it. Attention has become a commodity that we have exchanged in a thousand different trade-offs, for convenience, for speedy delivery, for targeted advertisements that better suit our wants and needs, for the ease of allowing an algorithm to do the dirty work of filtering out our feeds to prevent us from seeing anything we don't agree with. In fact, the groundwork for this failure of attention has been laid since the first smartphones and the ever-pervasive constant presence of the internet began infiltrating our daily lives. Author Nicholas Carr spoke of this phenomenon as early as 2010, writing in his bestselling book *The Shallows*: "I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle" (Carr 5). By now, it is hard to deny that the internet and all its affiliated technologies have fundamentally altered the nature of our attention. The stress of the current moment is only one small piece of it.

I was learning the language that enabled me to see the birds, but "you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed" (James, "What Pragmatism Means" 6). Our existing reality was changing, rapidly and disorientingly, accelerating the trends that had been, for years, making it more and more difficult to do the necessary work of attending to the words that we read, of attending to the reality of the everyday life that we are right in the middle of.

In fact, it seems to have become increasingly more impossible to truly attend to our realities. Instead of doing the necessary work of attending, we are caught in a seemingly never-ending quagmire of bad news, fake news, misuse of justice, misuse of power, misuse of self and of others. However, it is the direction we allow our thoughts to take, and the ways in which we focus our attention, that are, in the end, what ends up making up our everyday lives. As Wallace Stevens has said, "we live in the mind," and so the things we pay attention to are the things that will ultimately shape our mind (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 140). We make our lives with what we give our attention to. The world we create in the mind is the world that we will live in, the world that will form the reality of our everyday lives. Giving attention, then, is not an arbitrary task, but the work of a focused action of creation, which directs our minds to shape the world that we will ultimately live in.

If we live only in the mind, then "the imagination lives as the mind lives" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 151). Therefore, when our attention fails, when we do not attend to our own realities, we are also experiencing a failure of the imagination, because "the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 6). To take control

over the world you live in is to do more than just attend to reality. It also means doing the work of attending to the inner world, the world where language and the imagination reside. According to Stevens, "the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in the chaos" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 153). Problems arise, however, when we are unwilling or unable to direct our own attention. If we fail to attend to our own reality, then others will do it for us. There is no shortage of entities, companies, organizations, or people that will have no problem competing to shape our reality and direct our attention to serve their own ends. In times like these, when chaos seems to run rampant, and when our attention is being wrestled away from ourselves and drawn to injustices and lies, to churning news cycles, constant crises, and incessant petty distractions, it seems that more, not less, attention needs to be paid to the imagination, where the chaos can be sorted and order of the mind can be restored. However, as our own reality becomes increasingly untenable, our imagination instead "adheres to what is unreal….As we were traversing the whole heaven" that has been promised to us by the infinite streams of all the information we could possible want to see, curated specifically to align with our own interests, biases, and beliefs, and available for at our fingertips at any moment for immediate self-gratifying consumption, "the imagination lost its power to sustain us. It has the strength of reality or none at all" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 7).

Our reality has become less and less our own. We are unable to escape the "pressure of reality...the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the elusion of any power of contemplation" because incessant flurries of externals demands are now omnipresent (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 20). Neverending external pressures accompany us everywhere we go, allowing no private reprieve for true contemplation. Every day, technology, social media,

the internet, the 24-hour news cycle, and myriad other things are all competing for our attention and the chance to shape our realities, thanks to the rise of the so-called "attention economy," which "puts our attention as a limited resource at the centre of the informational ecosystem, with our various alerts and notifications locked in a constant battle to capture it" (Nixon par. 1). Attention has become a currency, in which things like clickbait websites, smartphone notifications, and social media apps are vying for our minds. The prevalence of technology and the pitfalls of its distracting nature have been well-covered in the past several years, since smart technology began to infiltrate the everyday experience, cleverly designed to be ever more addictive to entice our attention back to various screens so as to generate larger and larger profits off of the commodity of our attention, profits which come at the expense not only of our health and happiness, but to the detriment of our imagination and our very minds.

Those who profit off of the capturing of our attention are well aware of the damage they are doing. In a 2016 article published in *The Atlantic,* a Silicon Valley veteran compared the "tech industry to Big Tobacco before the link between cigarettes and cancer was established: keen to give customers more of what they want yet simultaneously inflicting collateral damage on their lives" (Bosker par. 7). But the damage is not collateral. It is a very intentional part of the design process, as founding Facebook president Sean Parker explained in a 2017 interview with Axios:

> The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: 'How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?' And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get

you ... more likes and comments...It's a social-validation feedback loop ... exactly the

kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a

vulnerability in human psychology. The inventors, creators...understood this consciously.

And we did it anyway (Allen par. 3).

This purposeful attention exploitation was not limited to Facebook. Former Google

employee and design ethicist Tristan Harris spoke to *The Atlantic* in 2016 about his experience

working for a company whose success was dependent on directing and holding more and more

people's attention towards their screens for longer and longer periods of time, saying that "never

before in history have the decisions of a handful of designers (mostly men, white, living in SF,

aged 25-35) working at 3 companies...had so much impact on how millions of people around the

world spend their attention" (Bosker par. 16). Harris described "the attention economy, which

showers profits on companies that seize our focus" as part of what he calls a "race to the bottom

of the brain stem," explaining "'you could say that it's my responsibility' to exert self-control

when it comes to digital usage…'but that's not acknowledging that there's a thousand people on

the other side of the screen whose job is to break down whatever responsibility I can maintain.'"

(Bosker par. 5).

This media is specifically designed to be addictive, to capture our attention and "hook us

by tapping into deep-seated human needs," including the desires to feel connected to and

included by our peers (Bosker par. 9). Big tech companies are able to capture ever more of our

daily consciousness by employing what experimental psychologist B.J. Fogg called "behavior

designs," which includes "building software that nudges us toward the habits a company seeks to

instill...for example, rewarding someone with an instantaneous 'like' after they post a photo can

reinforce the action, and potentially shift it from an occasional to a daily activity" (Bosker par.

8). Although it is easy to "blame our collective tech addiction on personal failings, like weak willpower...that itch to glance at our phones is a natural reaction to apps and websites engineered to get us scrolling as frequently as possible... In short, we've lost control of our relationship with technology because technology has become better at controlling us" (Bosker par. 5).

In more recent years, Silicon Valley's ability to control and alter our everyday reality has only continued to grow stronger. Social media companies, like Facebook, now not only insert themselves into our everyday life through the deployment of addictive distractions in the forms of likes and notifications, but have become scarily effective at directing the narrative of our thoughts by controlling, through algorithms, the very news and information that we are exposed to, consume, and ultimately allow to influence and shape our worldview. Facebook employs a "scale-at-any-cost business model...Scale and engagement are valuable to Facebook because they're valuable to advertisers. These incentives lead to design choices such as reaction buttons that encourage users to engage easily and often, which in turn encourage users to share ideas that will provoke a strong response. Every time you click a reaction button on Facebook, an algorithm records it, and sharpens its portrait of who you are. The hyper-targeting of users, made possible by reams of their personal data, creates the perfect environment for manipulation—by advertisers, by political campaigns, by emissaries of disinformation, and of course by Facebook itself, which ultimately controls what you see and what you don't see on the site" (LaFrance par. 11). This insidious control over our experience has leached into every part of our lives, impacting even those who actively try to avoid it. The fact of the matter is the effects of this technology are so far-reaching in our culture that its consumption is no longer simply a matter of personal choice and self-control, a fact that Parker admitted to Axios, saying: "The unintended consequences of a network when it grows to a billion or 2 billion people and ... it literally

changes your relationship with society, with each other ... It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains" (Allen par. 3).

Except with each passing year, we have learned more and more about what it is doing, both to our brains and to the brains of our children, and the results are not good. These incessant distractions and disruptions that trigger our desire for social connection and inclusion only serve to make us feel more lonely, alienated, and depressed. A 2013 study on Facebook use conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan "found that the more people used Facebook during one time period, the worse they subsequently felt. The authors also asked people to rate their level of life satisfaction at the start and end of the study. They found that the more participants used Facebook over the two-week study period, the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time" (University of Michigan par. 6). Lead author Ethan Kross further elaborated: "On the surface, Facebook provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling the basic human need for social connection. But rather than enhance well-being, we found that Facebook use predicts the opposite result -- it undermines it" (University of Michigan par. 2).

A similar study conducted by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, published in December of 2020, showed that "young adults who increased their use of social media were significantly more likely to develop depression within six months" (Magsam par. 1). The study of "more than 1,000 U.S. adults between 18 to 30...measured depression using the validated nine-item Patient Health Questionnaire and asked participants about the amount of time they used social media on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and SnapChat," while controlling for "demographic factors like age, sex, race, education, income and employment" and including "survey weights so the results would reflect the greater U.S. population" (Magsam par. 5). The study's co-author, University of Pittsburgh assistant professor of psychiatry Dr. Cesar

Escobar-Viera, explained that "one reason for these findings may be that social media takes up a lot of time. Excess time on social media may displace forming more important in-person relationships, achieving personal or professional goals, or even simply having moments of valuable reflection" (Magsam par. 6).

And this question of reflection gets closer to the heart of the matter. It is worth asking why we are so willing to give up these valuable moments, to trade away the necessary acts of contemplation and focused, quiet attention for constant, depression-inducing distractions. While there is no doubt that these various apps and devices are intentionally designed with addiction in mind, there is still an element of personal choice. Without any overt external coercion, many of us actively choose to make social media accounts on various different platforms, leave our notifications on, and keep our phones - a major source from which distractions emanate - within an arm's reach at all times. To consider the nature of attention also forces us to question why, exactly, it is so easy for external forces to exert their control over it, why we are so willing to allow others to exploit our precious resource of attention for their own gains. If attention is now a commodity, we should consider just how low we value it, how small a price we put on granting others the use of our minds.

It is easy enough to distract us, and profit off of that use of our attention, because the act of being deliberate in our attention, of asserting dominance over our own particular experience of reality, is hard work. It is at times so difficult that some people would rather experience real discomfort than attend to their reality. According to a 2014 article published by researchers from the University of Virginia and Harvard University, the authors reported "in 11 studies, we found that participants typically did not enjoy spending 6 to 15 minutes in a room by themselves with nothing to do but think, that they enjoyed doing mundane external activities much more, and that

many preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves instead of being left alone with their thoughts. Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, even if that something is negative (Wilson, et al. par. 2). The findings showed that "the state of being alone with one's thoughts...appears to be an unpleasant experience. In fact, many of the people studied, particularly the men, chose to give themselves a mild electric shock rather than be deprived of external sensory stimuli" (Wilson, et al. par. 1). Doing the work of the mind is, at times, more painful than experiencing physical pain. The instant gratification and immediate dopamine hits that are brought to us by the distractions of Big Tech are undeniably far more pleasurable than the uncomfortable, strenuous, at times even painful process of reflection, of sitting with our own thoughts and attending to our attention not only as a resource to trade, which is simple, but as an experience, which is far more work.

Our attention is not simply a commodity to be bought and sold, or a resource to be mined, but a way of being, the thing that "joins us with the outside world" (Nixon par. 4). If we consider this flip side of the attention, in which we have the "capacity to attend in a more 'exploratory' way: to be truly open to whatever we find before us, without any particular agenda," then the consideration of attention has to take into account the agency that lies before us, to explore things that might truly nourish us, and to really consider how we might want to be deliberate in the ways that we shape our minds (Nixon par. 4). Because "what we pay attention to, and how we pay attention, shapes our reality, moment to moment, day to day," the intrusive distractions that may seem on their face to be no big deal in actuality has huge, life-altering impacts on our very selves (Nixon par. 8). Freely giving away the our attention is destructive not just for us as consumers, but risks a future where "we gradually lose touch with attention-as-experience altogether," and instead "attention becomes solely a thing to utilise, a means of getting things

done, something from which value can be extracted" (Nixon par. 11). But when we willingly sacrifice our attention, we are also sacrificing something much more important. When we allow others to dictate our train of mind, day in and day out, we also cede an essential part of the construction of our identities.

Back in 1997, David Foster Wallace first identified the beginnings of this problem in his observation that "watching TV can become malignantly addictive," explaining "an activity is addictive if one's relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and downright needing it….something is malignantly addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes. A malignant addiction is also distinguished for spreading the problems of the addiction out and in in interference patterns, creating difficulties for relationships, communities, and the addict's very sense of self and soul" (Wallace 163). The self can be defined as "the active element of all consciousness...the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear emanate the fiats of the will," and so the ubiquitous mediums to which we outsource our attention are disruptive not only in short bursts amidst our day to day lives, but are disruptive to our very sense of self (James, "Principles of Psychology" 127). The fantasy provided by technology like TV, and now the internet, smartphones, social media platforms, and other technological distractions, allow us to abdicate, for however long we choose to imbibe, the responsibility of being in charge of our own effort and attention. They allow someone else to take the reins of our focus and direct it instead towards advertisements, comforting storylines, and curated images that soothe us by telling us we need not put forth any effort to enjoy these comfortable, yet empty, shadows of experience. However, to give in to these easy, predetermined narratives, instead of doing the work of directing our own realities, is also to accept a weaker, paler sort of existence

than the ones we cultivate when we actively attend to our own experiences, because "what distinguishes us as a species is not our technological prowess, but rather our extraordinary ability to confer meaning on our experience and to search for clues about our purpose from the world around us," which "has from the beginning been the product of our other great distinguishing aptitude: the ability to communicate symbolically through language...language is the soil, the seedbed, of meaning...literature holds meaning not as a content that can be abstracted and summarized, but as experience. It is a participatory area. Through the process of reading we slip out of our customary time orientation, marked by distraction and superficiality, into the realm of duration" (Birkerts 31 - 32).

When we do not devote the necessary act of attention towards more a contemplative arena, we are unable to connect with our selves on a deeper level, because "our considering the spiritual self at all is a reflective process" of the kind that would not be possible without the aid of the use of language (James, "Principles of Psychology" 126). To be able to conceive of the self at all comes as "the result of our abandoning the outward-looking point of view, and of our having become able to think of subjectivity as such, to think ourselves as thinkers" (James, "Principles of Psychology" 126). And because "language...is itself the medium of our deepest awareness," the tool that allows for us to be capable of such complicated second-order cognitive dynamics, it is also impossible to possess a solid sense of self without the grounding that language provides (Birkerts 113). The more our attention becomes fractured by ever more demanding technology, the weaker our connection to the necessary power of language becomes, and the easier it is to separate us from our very selves.

Our devotion is to technology one that "in large doses affects people's values and self-esteem in deep ways. That televisual conditioning influences the whole psychology of one's

relationship to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes"

(Wallace 174). Now, that detrimental relationship to self and others has only been amplified by

the myriad other ways in which technology and entertainment have infiltrated every waking

minute of our lives. The pull of the this visual conditioning is almost entirely unavoidable.

Electronic mediums are a poor substitute for real awareness or moments of true reflection that

encourage self-knowledge and self-growth. The work of language, on the other hand, enables

one to do the real work of attending to one's self, by encouraging one to direct the focus of their

attention on real experiences, real people, and to find real meaning through the construction of

authentic narratives, rather than 2-D imitations or shallow plotlines. Living our lives through

screens obstructs our view of reality, preventing us from seeing the true shape of things, much

like how Stevens'

      Icicles filled the long window

      With barbaric glass.

      The shadow of the blackbird

      Crossed it, to and fro.

      The mood

      Traced in the shadow

      An indecipherable cause ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird").

So much of what we have been living through seems to be indecipherable. We are constantly

barraged by "an extraordinary pressure of news...news incomparably more pretentious than any

description of it, news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or, call it, of life; then of news of a

new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not know anything whatever of its

nature, and does not know now...the consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which have made the ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 20).

I do not think it was by accident that I first became aware of this troubling development at a time in my life when I felt acutely like I had lost the thread, my "day-to-day...like some vast assortment of colored beads without a string to hold them together" (Birkerts 94). But I had not so much lost the thread, as I had freely given it away, parceling out every scrap of my attention and gifting it to whichever medium would have it. At work, I streamed TV shows nonstop on my many monitors, stayed hunched over my phone in the elevator, fell asleep with screens jammed in my face. All of this I did on purpose, because to do otherwise would be to give my own thoughts space to enter my mind, would be to force me to sit in my own uncomfortable silence with myself, and I did not like the company that I would have had. I believe I was, at the time, depressed, although I was never diagnosed, which is another way of saying that I never got it named.

I came to the conclusion that I had lost my sense of self-respect, but it was, perhaps, something deeper than that. In order to have self-respect, one must have, first, a sense of self, which is almost impossible to do when every single moment of your waking attention is given away to the siren call of screens and television, social media, the internet, and every other mindless piece of entertainment that demands our half-starved focus. I was "possessed by the emotion of fear" and when "we are in a negative state of mind; that is, our desire is limited to the mere banishing of something, without regard to what shall take its place" (James, "Principles of Psychology" 133). So it is not surprising that, in this state, we are drawn to electronic mediums that churn out entertaining and ironic content that is pleasurable, addictive and distracting but

"singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (Wallace 183). Rather, creation is the purview of language, as Robert Creeley aptly demonstrated in his poem *The Language:*

Words

say everything.

I

love you

again,

then what

is emptiness

for. To

fill, fill.

I heard words

and words full

of holes

aching. Speech

is a mouth (Creeley).

Stevens wrote that "language is perpetual creation," the tool we have to fill the emptiness, to replace what we have lost (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 33). In fact, "a man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends...upon his love of truth and

his desire to communicate it without loss," to create something with which to fill what has been banished (Emerson, "Nature" 20). However, "the explosion of data - along with general societal secularization and the collapse of what the theorists call the 'master narratives'...has all but destroyed the premise of understandability. Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture. Instead of carrying on the ancient project of philosophy - attempting to discover the 'truth' of things - we direct our energies to managing information," a futile task that confuses collecting and summarizing with creation and truth (Birkerts 75).

Now, despite our ability to transmit more and more information faster and faster, we are living in a society that is more fractured than ever before. Every group separates itself into tribes, self- segregating and self-selecting only the information that adheres to their own preconceived notions and beliefs, while increasingly shunning all those who do not belong in their particular group. Additionally, more of our time is now spent not just managing information, but also managing disinformation. Whether intentionally or not, reams of poorly thought out, factually incorrect, or ill-informed pieces of data disseminate throughout our media systems, driving even deeper wedges into society and thus sending people further into their own siloed tribes. Constantly caught up within the large swaths of information at our disposal, many of us are no longer able to discern or agree upon even such basic things as the truth. This is in large part because "the transition...to the culture of electronic communication..radically alter[s] the ways in which we use language on every societal level. The complexity and distinctiveness of spoken and written expression, which are deeply bound to the traditions of print literacy, will gradually be replaced by a more telegraphic sort of 'plainspeak,'" in which elementals essential to grasping the truth of life, like nuance, debate, and gray areas are increasingly eschewed in favor of

emotionally charged but ultimately simplistic, one-note, us vs. them arguments (Birkerts 128).

Each event spins off a tangled network of different narratives, each with their own biases, bents, and foregone agendas, many designed with the explicit intent to stir up strong emotions in those who consume the narrative, creating " a series of vicious cycles" through which "language will grow increasingly impoverished...For, of course, the usages of literature and scholarship are connected in fundamental ways to the general speech of the tribe" (Birkerts 129). Every narrative cultivates a specific emotion or feeling in its intended audience - that which thrills one tribe will infuriate the opposing group, because we are "no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images: what binds us became what we stood witness to" rather than what we have communicated and understood (Wallace 166). We become like the rider who

> ...rode over Connecticut
>
> In a glass coach.
>
> Once, a fear pierced him,
>
> In that he mistook
>
> The shadow of his equipage
>
> For blackbirds (Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird").

We continue to mistake the shadows and images for things of real substance. We become further addicted to the "self-nourishing" cycle that gives us an "ironic permission slip to do what [we] do best whenever [we] feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position; a pose of passive reception to escape, comfort, reassurance" (Wallace 165). Rather than actively attending to our reality, we allow the companies behind the soothing apps, videos, and various media that lives behind our many screens to assume the role of the stage directors of our lives, turning our

attentions towards whichever topic will best serve their interests and their bottom line. We allow the technology "to substitute for something nourishing and needed, and the original hunger subsides to a strange objectless unease" (Wallace 164).

The unease is felt in part because it has become more and more difficult to locate ourselves as something separate from the media, due the increasingly more intrusive and invasive nature of the technology. However, when we give in to this cycle, when we allow our language to flatten, and allow our memory to lose its depth, it comes at a great detriment to our very sense of selves, because "there can be no autobiographical self without language" (Hustvedt 58). Language is the generative tool we use to construct a sense of identity through the creation of our own internal narratives. We are able to create a consistent, ongoing narrative of our lives because "the areas that control the 'I,' the first-person subject who speaks...usually reside in the left hemisphere, in the language areas of the brain" (Hustvedt 52). However, while "language appears to be vial to self-reflexive awareness..but it is not necessary for registering the images and responding to them," so the televisual conditioning we have come to increasingly rely on can slowly, over time, diminish the self-awareness that comes when we devote our attention to language-driven contemplation and self-reflection (Hustvedt 53). The more time that our brains spend responding to online images, the areas of the brain that process and strengthen our language skills weaken, because "thinking in pictures is...only a very incomplete form of becoming conscious. In some way, too, it stands near to unconscious processes than does thinking in words" (Hustvedt 60). As we devote more and more time to processing the images that come across our screens, the weaker our language processing powers become, and with it, our sense of true self-awareness and identity weakens as well.

And yet, at the same time, social media demands a certain type of hyper-self awareness of our self-image, but only insofar as the image is presented to others online. The one-dimensional view of oneself that is presented through social media is a shallow, fleeting image of the self at a singular, staged moment, not a self that is a whole, complex, entire being with a history and a past. To the contrary, language is the very tool that enables us to create a coherent, multi-dimensional sense of self, one which allows for nuance, growth, and agency. Human beings have the unique capacity to use words "to control what is missing. We use symbols, and those symbols give us power over what is no longer there or is yet to come" (Hustvedt 58). Writing things down is a way to assert control over the events of our lives, to create order and draw meaning and understanding from what we have done and what has been done to us. Through this vital act of self-reflection, we are able to grow and to mature. Constructing a narrative of our lives allows us to connect coherent lines between the people we once were, and the people we are today, without creating a sense of fractured identity. Our internal stories create a sense of self that is linear and continuous, rather than disjointed and disparate. Joan Didion has described the act of writing things down in a notebook as a way to "keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be" (Didion, "Keeping A Notebook" 139). The narratives we create for ourselves allows our stories to settle, lets our past selves take their comfortable place in the past. Without exercising this power of self-control over our stories, our past selves may "turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammerings on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends" (Didion, "Keeping A Notebook" 139). Like in Didion's notebooks, the use of language fixes events in time, which allows the present self to move forward, unencumbered by the past, because human "episodic memory...is explicit. It is owned by a self-conscious 'I.' It is literally

re-collection, the act of bringing bits of the past into present consciousness," and it is possible only because "much of this takes linguistic form, is self-reflective, and therefore makes it possible for me to see myself in myself but also to regard myself as if from afar - as some else might see me" (Hustvedt 61-62). How well-adjusted one's self is, however, may well be judged by how easily one is able to leave the past in the past, how fragile their thin line between the past and present, because "true stories can't be told forward, only backward. We invent them from the vantage point of an ever-changing present and tell ourselves how they unfolded" (Hustvedt 38). Those of us that are unable to do this, that are unable to construct a coherent narrative of ourselves and our stories, often find ourselves stuck, trapped in time, unable to grow or move forward, become unable to truly move on with our lives. The ability to construct a story about our own lives is "a human capacity that allows for an idea of time as we feel it. It lets us locate events in our lives behind us or in some imagined time ahead" (Hustvedt 57). When we are able to locate our thoughts externally as symbols and then meditate on them as external objects, we are able to both "daydream about the future or long for the past," but the boundaries of the past, present, and future are clearly defined (Hustvedt 57). Language gives us both a clear sense of time and a sense of continuity within that time.

However, we live now in a time when "defining boundaries have been deformed by electric signal" (Wallace 172). It is a time of constant immediacy, one in which we subject ourselves to the demands of the barrage of visual images that we are constantly inundated with day in and day out. We live in a period of inarticulacy caused not by a fundamental inability to express our needs but by our own failure to attend to them. Our inability to articulate our experience is also due in part to the fact that "the present always appears to be an illogical complication," and we can never escape the present (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 15). In the

online world where all information is readily available with the click of the button, and social media demands that we - or at least, some performative version of ourselves - be constantly present online, we are never able to get time away to consider our own stories, never given the time to process events, or to place them into the broader context which enables us to learn from them. It is impossible to understand a time when we are in it, but in this strange new world, we are never really outside of what is happening now. Because of the constant demands of new technology, we are always caught up living within "an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence" (Stevens, "The Necessary Angel" 17). We cannot escape the immediate demands of the persistent present tense.

Living a life almost entirely online has brought us to a place where everything feels impermanent. Things live behind an intangible screen, and are present only until we scroll through or click away to a different page, but, paradoxically, at the same time nothing can ever truly be erased. Everything that has ever been posted lives forever online, lurking somewhere out of sight until some surreptitious digging brings it back to the surface again. However, the reemergence of old posts lack the context in which they were originally created, and so, when and if they do emerge, they do so without any sense of consistency or continuity. Therefore, to have an online presence is to constantly experience a sense of both constant immediacy, and to live in a place where everything is both paradoxically fleeting and permanent.

This stands in contrast to the experience of language, which gives us the time and space with which to meditate more thoughtfully and engage more fully with nuance and depth. Away from the neverending demands of the online world, we are more free to explore the depths of the inner world, to understand that "the quality of imagination is to flow, and not to freeze...for all

symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance" (Emerson, "The Poet" 20). Words have the unique power to transport us, to take us to a time and place where we have never been, or to a time and place where we have been once and can never be again. I have never been to Pittsburgh, known no one who lives there, could not even point out a street name on a map, but when I first read Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's *Streets of Pittsburgh* in the spring of 2012, at the age of eighteen, I was introduced to a city that was "infamously difficult to navigate...mainly black and mostly poor," a place where "one summer morning I stood on the corner with a group of neighbors while we observed a man hurl a garbage can through the windshield of a car" (Sayrafiezadeh par. 3). Some stories stay with you, as this one did for me, and I thought, often, of Pittsburgh. I noticed it when it arrived in other works, other poems. I noticed it when I first read Jack Gilbert, some four years later:

> Often I took care of the baby while she did
>
> housework. Changing him and making him laugh.
>
> I would say *Pittsburgh* softly each time before
>
> throwing him up. Whisper *Pittsburgh* with
>
> my mouth against the tiny ear and throw
>
> him higher. Pittsburgh and happiness high up.
>
> The only way to leave even the smallest trace.
>
> So that all his life her son would feel gladness
>
> unaccountably when anyone spoke of the ruined
>
> city of steel in America. Each time almost
>
> remembering something maybe important that got lost (Gilbert).

Of course, I know I have never been to Pittsburgh, but this transitive quality of language enables a type of controlled time travel, one in which we are able to "organize the past as explicit autobiographical memory...fragments are linked in a narrative, which in turn shapes our expectations for the future" (Hustvedt 58). Imagination transports us, but it also adheres to that which is real, because "stories always take place in *time*. They have a sequence, and they are always behind us" and "human *time*, essential to working to consciousness and, of course, storytelling, may well arrive through language" (Hustvedt 43, 56). Language enables us to say: this happened first, and next, and last. It gives a sense of context, a grounded footing onto which we can build our lives. It enables a complex, higher-order understanding of before and after, of past and future, of nostalgia and hope. It allows for an appreciation of rich, multi-layered experience, so that one does

> ...not know which to prefer,
>
> The beauty of inflections
>
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
>
> The blackbird whistling
>
> Or just after (Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird").

The stories that we tell ourselves about our own lives are vital to constructing a sense of self, and what we choose to include in them, what we choose to write down and remember, gives us an essential sort of power over our own experience that is unlike the capability of any other non-language using beings, who are unable to learn from the past or imagine the future, because a "lack of richness and flexibility - verb tenses in particular - create[s] a world of an ongoing

present" (Hustvedt 56). There is no time without language, no hope without the future tense. Without language, we are trapped, forever living in the endless, terrible now.

However, social media has removed much of our logical sense of time, and placed us online instead into a state of timelessness that is akin to trauma. Hustvedt describes trauma as a type of speechlessness, an incident that occurs outside of time as we can comprehend it, in large part because "trauma memory has no narration" (Hustvedt 43). Instead of taking the necessary time to contemplate, to place certain actions or events within the context of a larger timeline, we are pressured to always be living in an online world that is somewhere outside real, sequential time as we experience it. We are conditioned to always be reacting to the demands of a never ending, scrolling present. Alternatively, contemplative language does not demand an immediate reaction or response, which stands at a stark difference to our online lives, in which the sense that one must be constantly plugged in, engaged, and responding to whatever content passes our screens - no matter how irrelevant it might truly be to our real, day-to-day lives - often feels inescapable.

There are few better examples of this than people's reaction to the election of Donald Trump, and more specifically the reaction to his own social media presence. While Trump's impulsive use of social media was certainly unprecedented for any American president, the general public's reaction to his unrestrained online existence was also very telling, as a 2021 article by Peter Nicholas published in *The Atlantic* demonstrated. Following Donald Trump's ouster from Twitter, many people online expressed a palpable sense of relief. Obsessive social media users felt a sense of freedom at finally being released from the draining emotional burden of keeping a constant watch on the president's Twitter account, but little was spoken about the utter inanity of people who were unable to acknowledge the personal choice aspect of their

decisions - namely, that they had been free to unfollow or block Donald Trump's Twitter account at any time prior to 2021, and yet chose not to. Matt Gertz, a senior fellow at the Media Matters for America, perfectly illustrated the utter absurdity of the activity by describing his new "day-to-day routine" during the Trump-on-Twitter era as: "'I would be with other people and I'd instantly pull out my phone...They would shrug and sigh and say, 'What did he do this time?' Then Gertz would have to scrounge through Fox broadcasts to see what Trump might have been watching that set him off...'He was watching Fox News while sitting in front of the television and tweeting about it. And I was watching Fox News while sitting in front of the television and tweeting about *him* tweeting about it'" (Nicholas par. 4).

The tech writer Mike Elgan, who has sent an estimated "thousands of tweets over the years in response to Trump's feed," then called Trump's Twitter "'just a massive time and energy suck on so many people—including myself,'" but still nobly took it upon himself to send thousands of replies "within seconds of Trump tweeting—in the hope that Trump supporters would read them and be swayed by whatever counterargument he was offering" (Nicholas par. 9, 10). Then, in the very next sentence, Elgan openly admitted: "I felt like I had no effect on his followers. They felt just perfectly impenetrable and immune to argumentation" (Nicholas par. 10). Which begs the question: why not just stop? Neither Elgan, Gertz, nor anyone else in the world was held hostage by the president's Twitter account - there were no guns held to their head, and they freely acknowledge that their own responses accomplished nothing except damage their own sense of well-being, and yet they continued to devote large swaths of their time and attention to the account. It seems a larger issue at play here is the general performative and self-serving nature of online politics, coupled with social media's inherently addictive

design, which leaves people either feeling like they have little personal choice in the matter. or simply refusing to exercise self-control over their own admittedly self-destructive habits, or both.

However, such people felt that their responses were still in some sense necessary, not only to express their own dissatisfaction and frustration with what they perceived as outlandish, unpresidential, or even immoral behavior, but also as a way to communicate to their peers and social circle something important and essential about their very selves - about the type of person that they are. This type of engagement on social media may well be motivated by an honest desire to change people's minds for the better, but it also serves a very essential demonstrative and performative purpose, in which people communicate vital information about themselves to their peers, colleagues, and society at large. Social media has completely altered the scope of our social landscape, "because electronic media have tended to diminish the differences between live and mediated interaction. The speech and appearance of others are accessible without being in the same physical location. The widespread use of electronic media leads to many new social situations" (Meyrowitz 38). As such, the necessity of being vocal about aspects of our morals, beliefs, and political leanings online become more important to communicate essential parts of our identity, about who we are and what we stand for. And while we might have, in the past, not needed to advertise our political leanings to everyone in our social sphere to feel a sense of belonging in a certain group, as "electronic media override[s] the boundaries and definitions of situations supported by physical settings," it has become increasingly more difficult to maintain personal and social boundaries, leading to an all-or-nothing type of social performance (Meyrowitz 38). Because social interactions are now defined by "'information systems' rather than physical settings, society's set of social situations can be modified without building or removing walls and corridors," and we are now in a time when being a part of the in-group often

means tweeting, posting, or otherwise publicly vocaling the shared opinions of this in-group, to assure acceptance, inclusion, and a shared sense of belonging and purpose (Meyrowitz 38). This harkens back to a more primitive time, which Meyrowitz describes:

> Oral societies, McLuhan argues, live in an 'ear culture' of simultaneity and circularity. The oral 'tribal' world of the ear is a 'closed society' of high interdependence and lack of individuality...writing and, to a greater degree, print, break through the tribal balance...the break from total reliance on oral communication allows people to become more introspective, rational, and individualistic. Abstract thought develops. From the circular world of sound with its round huts and round villages, people move, over time towards linear, cause-and-effect thinking, grid-like cities, and a one-thing-at-a-time and one-thing-after-another world that mimics the linear lines or writing and type (Meyrowitz 17).

The development from an oral to a more advanced, linguistic, reading society allowed for more nuance, individuality, and dissenting though, but now "as a result of the widespread use of electronic media, everyone is involved in everyone else's business, and there is a decline in print-supported notions of...linear thinking" (Meyrowitz 18).

The new media environment we live in creates the experience of being always in the endless *now*, which disrupts the linear thought that enables us to place our lives in an ordered sequence. The demands of social media have brought us, in many ways, back to the "village-like encounters, but on a global scale," by changing our linear, deep-reading brains into something more shallow and reactive, then profiting off the results (Meyrowitz 17-18). It brings us back, not only to an earlier sense of time in history, but also back to a type of individual linguistic infancy, one in which we respond and react to our own immediate emotions and sensations as

soon as they arise. Apps like Twitter play off of the strong emotional reactions to create an

environment where followers self-segregate into tribes of similar thought, and they encourage

heated and emotional retorts to any dissenters, which must be sent as soon as the emotion is felt,

or risk the moment passing by as the churning perpetual motion machine of the internet moves

on to the next big controversy. The result, of course, is much less a reasoned, well-thought-out

debate, but rather the strengthening of tribal us vs. them mentalities that are continually self-

reinforcing the more time one spends online. We seem to have become a people without a

context. Our time is no longer our own. Social media has created a place "where time has been

commodified, flattened, turned into yet another thing measured, there is no chance that any piece

of information can unfold its potential significance. We are destroying this deep time...Where the

electronic impulse rules, and where the psyche is conditioned to work with data, the experience

of deep time is impossible. No deep time, no resonance; no resonance, no wisdom" (Birkerts 75 -

76).

     In a 2018 essay, theater critic and *New Yorker* staff writer Hilton Als quoted the fashion

photographer Bill Cunningham. "The wearing of clothes at the proper place and time is so

important," Cunningham wrote in his memoir, *Fashion Climbing* (qtd. in Als par. 8). Last

summer, I attended a Zoom funeral for a friend's mother, and was uncertain what to wear over

the video stream. In the end, I opted for a black top, and dark green pants, although most of the

attendees seemed to be in casual wear, jeans and T-shirts. While dwelling on the particularities

of our individual fashion choices might seem frivolous, even vapidly self-absorbed, in the midst

of a moment of great personal anguish and historical tragedy, our choice of clothing really

reveals a good deal more about ourselves than it might seem at first blush. Our clothing tells "a

story—not only about the wearer, but also about her time." (Als par. 8). Dressing, or not

dressing, for a tragedy, was another new uncertainty, another tradition that had been completely uprooted in the past year. The pandemic had shaken even our most fundamental rituals. Wearing solemn black to a funeral, or wearing professional business casual clothing to work, or even the slight thrill of slipping into a miniskirt and low cut top on a Friday night, were all basic, fundamental, seemingly inconsequential parts of the performance of living that were suddenly erased. The roles that we had become so accustomed to performing had profoundly shifted, and, accordingly, so had the costumes in which we used to perform them.

Als then asks "how dare one not pay attention to the world one lives in, a world filled with the gorgeous tragedy of what is happening now, never to be repeated" (Als par. 8). Our fashion has become pajamas, yoga pants, loose waistbands, a reflection of our specific tragedy. A tragedy of 600,000 dead, of a whole year lost to fear and anxiety and waiting and grief. A tragedy of our failure to attend to our time. A tragedy of our failure of attention. How we dare not pay attention, how dare we let our concentration lag when we most need to attend to the many tragedies, both great and small.

The great tragedy, not only of the dead, but of the rending disruption of one of the most ancient, and most fundamental, of all human rituals - the ritual of burying our dead. Our many, many dead. One of the most fundamental of all human rituals, the ritual of the funeral, had become suddenly, completely disrupted. Without the rituals to fall back on, the performance itself suddenly risks becoming meaningless, pointless, even absurd. In her brutal account of grief, Joan Didion reflected on the experience of reading Emily Post's 1922 book of etiquette:

At the time she undertook her book of etiquette, there would have been few American households untouched by the influenza pandemic of 1918. Death was up close, at home.

The average adult was expected to deal competently, and also sensitively, with its

aftermath (Didion, "Magical Thinking" 60 - 61).

It seems we are losing our instinctive sense of what is supposed to be done at a given time.

Etiquette books have also gone the way of the typewriter, dial-up internet, or the CD-ROM. I'd

imagine you would be hard pressed to find many people of the current generation who have been

gifted etiquette books by their mothers. Quite the opposite, tearing up outdated rules and

rejecting old ways of thinking have become *la mode du jour*, the past now viewed with a fiercely

critical eye. But for all its outdatedness, its prissy adherence to proper behavior, its prim, even

stuffy, code of manners, what else if etiquette if not rules for living in a world that by itself has

no clearly defined rules, no borders, no order, no outward coherent sense? A world that is, on its

own, utterly confusing. By adhering to a written set of social behavior, we help give the world

order. By acknowledging the rules, we acknowledge that there is a certain agreed-upon set of

rituals that we must follow. There are performances that we must enact. There are essential roles

that we must play.

And these performances are not nothing. They, too, are the guidelines with which we use

to steer our behaviors and construct our sense of self, to create public personas by which we

become known, respected, and understood by others. They help make up the essential building

blocks of the important social relationships that are necessary to our lives. And these

performances, too, have been dismantled by the limitless omnipotence of social media, which

locates us both everywhere and nowhere all at once. Online, our presence is constantly

demanded, yet we can never truly attend to one single thing.

The academic Joshua Meyrowitz first described this particular development in 1985,

writing that "until recently, place-bound, face-to-face interaction was the only means of gaining

'direct' access to the sights and sounds of each other's behaviors," however, "it is not the physical setting itself itself that determines the nature of the interaction, but the patterns of information flow" that communicates "social information: all that people are capable of knowing about the behavior of themselves and others (Meyrowitz 35, 36, 37). As new forms of media disrupts and changes the flow of information, "in the same way, social situations and social performances in society, in general, may be changed by the introduction of new media of communication" (Meyrowitz 37). There are few ways in which our performances have not been altered by the changing landscape of our social lives, brought on by the significant altering of our social sphere.

The phenomenon of which Meyrowitz spoke of has only increased exponentially since the boundary of place was first disrupted by the introduction of personal television sets and into the home. With the proliferation of smartphones, 24/7 internet access, and incessant demands of social media, the former boundaries that once delineated both time and place have been all but erased. When one is somewhere, one is also posting and tweeting and checking messages, always irrefutably connected to everywhere and everyone else, all the time. As such, our ability to *be* any one place, and as such to *be* any one person, performing any one role at a given time, is under constant assault. We are constantly performing artificial roles, yet neglecting to attend to the rituals that might enable us to build authentic bonds, with others and with ourselves.

Electronic media in general, and social media most of all, has disrupted our most vital performances, turning our private performances public and twisting our public performances into an empty type of grandstanding. Writers Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell recently explained "the way social media turns so much communication into a public performance," writing:

Online political discussions...are experienced as angrier and less civil than those in real life; networks of partisans co-create worldviews that can become more and more extreme; disinformation campaigns flourish; violent ideologies lure recruits...We often think of communication as a two-way street. Intimacy builds as partners take turns, laugh at each other's jokes, and make reciprocal disclosures. What happens, though, when grandstands are erected along both sides of that street and then filled with friends, acquaintances, rivals, and strangers, all passing judgment and offering commentary?

The social psychologist Mark Leary coined the term sociometer to describe the inner mental gauge that tells us, moment by moment, how we're doing in the eyes of others. We don't really need self-esteem, Leary argued; rather, the evolutionary imperative is to get others to see us as desirable partners for various kinds of relationships. Social media, with its displays of likes, friends, followers, and retweets, has pulled our sociometers out of our private thoughts and posted them for all to see (Haid and Rose-Stockwell, par. 5-7).

The utter dismantling of our boundaries and the sloughing off our many once agreed upon roles has not led to freedom from constraint. Rather, it has left us more prone to manipulation, distraction, and an ever-worsening flattening of our lives and a loss of sense of self. And so it becomes a self-fulfilling cycle, in which the more we feel alienated from ourselves, the more we seek validation from the very same vehicles that have caused our estrangement. The proliferation of this technology has made us ready and eager consumers and producers of artifice, feeding us a steady diet of distraction and media manipulation, which we can use to avoid the uncomfortable moments of reflection that might enable us to actually form a meaningful connection with our

real selves. Our essential performances risk becoming completely flattened into 2-D shadows of ourselves that exist only behind the screens. We find we are "at the mercy of those we cannot but hold in contempt, we play roles doomed to failure before they are begun, each defeat generating fresh despair at the urgency of divining and meeting the next demand made upon us. It is the phenomenon sometimes called 'alienation from self'" (Didion, "Self-Respect" 148). Increasingly, these demands come not just from other people, but from the nameless, faceless demands of social media, of the news cycle, of apps and alerts and every fashionable new online space, so that we cannot shake the sense that, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, there is always something else we should be attending to, some other role that we should be playing. But the more roles we take on, the thinner we spread the image of ourselves online, the more we perform artificial versions of ourselves publicly rather than attend to our private selves, the flatter and shallower these roles become. To avoid this type of self-alienation is to take control of our own attention, and to direct our focus towards shaping our own lives and attending to our realities. It requires a sense of a "kind of self-respect [that] is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth" (Didion, "Self-Respect" 146). To develop a strong sense of self-respect, of course, one must have a strong sense of self, must have the discipline to sit with themselves, in their own thoughts, while avoid the comforting distractions and petty interruptions that are so much more immediately tempting than doing the work on the cultivating the mind in which they will live.

That is not to say that attending to the world of the mind renders all other social performance useless. Human beings have always had important social roles to enact, but it is worth considering which performances are ultimately shallow acts of compulsion, which lead to alienation, isolation, and addiction, and which enable us to better attend to and understand our

time, to engage in acts of contemplation, communication, and connection. Didion writes: "To say that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton is not to say that Napoleon might have been saved by a crash program in cricket; to give formal dinners in the rain forest would be pointless did not the candlelight flickering on the liana call forth deeper, stronger disciplines, values instilled long before. It is a kind of ritual, helping us to remember who and what we are" (Didion, "Self-Respect" 147). With many of our formal rituals dismantled, it seems now that it is becoming ever more difficult to remember who and what we are. And for the rituals to work, we ourselves must believe in them. Rituals, like a more formalized type of etiquette, direct us towards a specific set of performances or social behavior that is necessary to enact at a certain time and place. Engaging in rituals, be they religious rituals, or rituals of mourning, celebration, marriage or grief, also allow us to believe in something that is necessarily greater than our own individual lives. The very act of performing a ritual is the act of partaking in an act of continuity, of taking our place among a long line of those who have performed the tradition before us and the believers who will come after. This sense of continuation, this connection to a larger history, is exactly what we lack when we post, scroll, or send messages over a screen where context is lost almost immediately after it has been sent. We partake in these performances, not simply for the sake of documenting them for others to see, but because the act of doing them encourages us to focus our attention onto the reality of our time and place. They awaken the imagination, helping us to derive meaning and purpose from our individual experiences, connecting us to something larger, greater, and more sublime than ourselves.

Emerson aptly described many of the symptoms of our current moment, writing:

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary

47

desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of

praise - and duplicity and falsehood take the place of simplicity and truth, the power over

nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created,

and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not...the fraud is manifest, and

words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections (Emerson, "Nature"

20).

Desire, duplicity, and falsehood seem now to rule the day, while our language more and more

often seems to falter and fail to capture the understanding of what we mean. As our everyday

experience becomes increasingly captivated by images on screens, the work of the poet, who

understands language as not simply a method of speech but as a liberating tool, becomes

increasingly more difficult. The simple act of paying attention has become increasingly difficult

in modern times, thanks in large part to the addictive designs devised by big tech companies to

turn a profit by commodifying the bulk of our everyday experience. But while that is not by

accident, paying attention has also become more essential than ever, because "the strenuous

effort to attend to the material conditions of everyday life is not just the product if a culture of

distraction and spectacle - it is also a forceful response to the deprivations that culture has

wrought" (Epstein 11). Although it is clear that these modern developments have led to increased

convenience, ease, productivity, and comfort for many of us in our day-to-day lives, it is also

impossible to deny that those deprivations are many. Without the right words with which to

describe our time, we become ever more susceptible to the wrong words, the perverted words, to

words that do not excite the imagination, truly attend to the everyday, or do the necessary work

of liberating us from the constraints of the banal, repetitive tracks that our minds will only too

readily travel if we do not do the work of awaking the imagination. The poet Rae Armantrout

described her work by saying "I write to keep myself awake and alive...Writing...is a way to stay awake and alive in a society that discourages that" (qtd. in Epstein 11). Writing is in fact such a vital part of our continued existence because it is in the language, in the naming of things, that we can truly begin to recognize, to attend to, and to understand the realities of our everyday. Without engaging in the active effort that language use requires, it is all too easy to live our lives on auto-pilot, giving in to comfort and easy distraction, freely giving over to others the use of minds rather than put in the effort to direct our own attention in ways that might free us from the constraints of the banality of everyday worries, habits, and routines. And there can be little doubt that we live in a society that now more than ever discourages our attempts to become truly awake, to truly attend to what we are seeing, because there is ever more money to be made off of our lazily focused attention, or lack thereof. It is our use of language that is the tool that enables us to free ourselves from our already foregone conclusions and agendas, to liberate one from the thoughts that we are already in, and allow us instead to reach for the sublime.

Craig Arnold ends his poem "Bird-Understander" by writing:

These are your own words

your way of noticing

and saying plainly

of not turning away

from hurt

you have offered them

to me   I am only

giving them back

> if only I could show you
>
> how very useless
>
> they are not (Arnold)

The language with which we use to attend to our world is not useless. In a world that both starts and ends with language, we must use it to notice all that is around us, to acknowledge both the hurt and the beauty of it. Turning away, trying to lose ourselves in distraction, ceding control of our realities to profit-driven entities, does the world and ourselves a great disservice. Language is the tool that we need so that we might better see the world, so that we might better attend to our own time and place. So that we might finally see what was once invisible to us.

At the end of last summer, with the pandemic still a boundless uncertainty stretching endlessly into the future tense, I went to a lake with my Bird-Understander. When we canoed up to the very tip of the lake, we encountered a bevy of swans cutting silently across the water, which was draped with living leaves like something out of a fairy tale. We saw blue herons standing on the rocks, eyes unblinking, all-seeing, staying so still that at first I didn't believe they were real. On the coffee table in the cottage we stayed in, there happened to be a field guide to the birds of North America, and afterwards, we sat together practicing their names, all of the new words fitting so perfectly into my mouth.

Bibliography

Allen, Mike. "Sean Parker Unloads on Facebook: 'God Only Knows What It's Doing to Our Children's Brains.'" *Axios*, 9 Nov. 2017, www.axios.com/sean-parker-unloads-on-facebook-god-only-knows-what-its-doing-to-our-childrens-brains-1513306792-f855e7b4-4e99-4d60-8d51-2775559c2671.html. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Als, Hilton. "Bill Cunningham Was So Alive." *The New Yorker*, 5 Sept. 2018, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/bill-cunningham-was-so-alive. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Arnold, Craig. "Bird-Understander." *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52207/bird-understander. Accessed 16 June 2021.

Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Faber and Faber, 2006.

Bosker, Bianca. "The Binge Breaker." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, Nov. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/the-binge-breaker/501122/. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Clark, Andy. "Magic Words: How Language Augments Human Computation." *Language and Thought: Interdisciplinary Themes*, edited by Peter Carruthers and Jill Boucher, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

Creeley, Robert. "The Language." *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49024/the-language-56d22abc283f2. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Didion, Joan. "On Keeping A Notebook." *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, pp. 131-141.

Didion, Joan. "On Self-Respect." *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, pp. 142-148.

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Vintage Books, 2005.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, et al. "Nature." *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume I, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971, pp 17-23.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, et al. "The Poet." *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume III, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983, pp 3-24.

Epstein, Andrew. *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

"Exhibitions." *John James Audubon's The Birds of America - Exhibitions - NCMA - North Carolina Museum of Art*, ncartmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/39337. Accessed 16 June 2021.

Gilbert, Jack. "Trying To Have Something Left Over." *The Sun Magazine*, July 2013, www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/451/a-brief-for-the-defense. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Grady, Constance. "Why It's so Hard to Read a Book Right Now, Explained by a Neuroscientist." *Vox*, Vox, 11 May 2020, www.vox.com/culture/2020/5/11/21250518/oliver-j-robinson-interview-pandemic-anxiety-reading. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Haidt, Jonathan, and Tobias Rose-Stockwell. "The Dark Psychology of Social Networks." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, Dec. 2019, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Hustvedt, Siri. *The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves*. Henry Holt and Company, 2009.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. 1890. Vol. 1-2, Pantianos Classics, 2018.

James, William. "What Pragmatism Means." *Teaching American Philosophy*, 1907. http://teachhigh-phi.org/texts-resources/texts/JamesPragmatism.pdf.

"John James Audubon's The Birds of America Returns to View at the North Carolina Museum of Art ." *North Carolina Museum of Art*, 6 Feb. 2019, ncartmuseum.org/images/uploads/blog/FINAL_Audubon_Press_Release_.pdf. Press Release.

LaFrance, Adrienne. "Facebook Is a Doomsday Machine." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 15 Dec. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/12/facebook-doomsday-machine/617384/. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Laing, Olivia. *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking*. Picador, 2013.

Magsam, Shannon. "Increased Social Media Use Linked to Developing Depression, Research Finds." *University of Arkansas News*, University of Arkansas, 10 Dec. 2020, news.uark.edu/articles/55480/increased-social-media-use-linked-to-developing-depression-research-finds. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Meyrowitz, Joshua. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Nicholas, Peter. "The Hole Where Donald Trump Was." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 7 Feb. 2021, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/02/trump-has-left-void-american-political-life/617927/. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Nixon, Dan. "Attention Is Not a Resource but a Way of Being Alive to the World – Dan Nixon: Aeon Ideas." *Aeon*, Aeon, 7 Dec. 2018, aeon.co/ideas/attention-is-not-a-resource-but-a-way-of-being-alive-to-the-world. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Ochs, Caitlin, and Gina Cherelus. "'Dead Inside': The Morgue Trucks of New York City." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 27 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/opinion/coronavirus-morgue-trucks-nyc.html. Accessed 17 June 2021.

"Pantomime." *Encyclopedia.com*, 11 May 2018, https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/theater/pantomime. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Perry, Warren. "The Death of John James Audubon: January 27, 1851." *National Portrait Gallery*, 27 Jan. 2012, npg.si.edu/blog/death-john-james-audubon-january-27-1851#:~:text=According%20to%20Audubon%20biographer%20William,squirrels%20to%20alligators%20to%20moose.%E2%80%9D. Accessed 16 June 2021.

Rhodes, Richard. "John James Audubon: America's Rare Bird." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Dec. 2004, www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/john-james-audubon-americas-rare-bird-97819781/. Accessed 16 June 2021.

Sapir, E. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science." *Language*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1929, pp. 207–214. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/409588. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Sayrafiezadeh, Saïd. "Streets of Pittsburgh." *PEN America*, 14 Feb. 2012, pen.org/streets-of-pittsburgh/. Accessed 18 June 2021.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. Vintage Books, 1951.

Stevens, Wallace. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45236/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-a-blackbird. Accessed 16 June 2021.

University of Michigan. "Facebook use predicts declines in happiness, new study finds." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 14 August 2013. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/08/130814191910.htm>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Vershbow, Sophie. "I Can't Read a Book Right Now-And I Am Not Alone." *Vogue*, Vogue, 3 Apr. 2020, www.vogue.com/article/why-cant-i-read-books-right-now. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Voigt, Ellen Bryant. *The Art of Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song*. Graywolf Press, 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction, 13:2*, 1993, pp. 151-194.

Wilson, Timothy D., et al. "Just Think: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind." *Science*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 4 July 2014, science.sciencemag.org/content/345/6192/75. Accessed 17 June 2021.

Wu, Kaidi, and David Dunning. "Hypocognition: Making Sense of the Landscape beyond One's Conceptual Reach." Review of General Psychology, vol. 22, no. 1, Mar. 2018, pp. 25–35, doi:10.1037/gpr0000126.