

I have tried to personally move away from language/ ideas that center any form of individual cost of witness. Not because there ISN'T an individual cost, but because about too much of that veering into witness of genocide as the ACTUAL crisis, and not the genocides themselves. But, flawed as he may be, there's the Lester Bangs quote I return to, often. From a piece he did on Richard Hell in 1977: "The only questions worth asking today are whether humans are going to have any emotions tomorrow, and what the quality of life will be if the answer is no." I found this quote for the first time, years and years ago. When I was young, and first getting into antiwar protesting, and – crucially – when I was first learning about Palestine. And I remember having this central and immediate shock, reading about the horrors and history of life under Israeli occupation, which jarred me.

Even with what I already knew about South African apartheid, and what I was continually learning about the histories of genocides all throughout the globe, I remember thinking "How does ANYONE in the world know about this and not stop it? How are people just going on with their lives?" It didn't make sense to me as a teenager, who only thought in terms of urgent, immediate actions. A few nights ago, I led a meeting with my Group Of People Who Survived Themselves, and so much of that time was spent talking about how someone who did not always want to be alive must urgently reorient their lives in order to survive in a world that has no interest or investment in life. It's a tricky scenario, deciding, days or hours at a time, that you would not only like to be alive, but that you would like to make worthwhile use of your living, you would like to be of service to a principled struggle, of service to communities you value, while also being informed that the world you are in is not systemically equipped to value life, and therefore, on an individual level, many people do not value life. I believe it is worth it to overcome the challenges of that scenario, but it does require, for me, a continued re-wiring of my life and priorities. on the weekend of May 24th, I did a thing at Mass MoCa, with Vincent Valdez and Saul Williams. Saul performed on the night of the 24th. I was moved by much of the performance, but specifically by his indicting refrains, continually asking questions of the audience, of the self: "what will it take for you to change the way you are living?" Or "what will it take for you to withhold your labor?" Or "what will it take for you to change your priorities?" on the day of Saul's performance, 50 Palestinians were injured and 5 were murdered in a targeted Israeli attack as they attempted to get flour in Southern Gaza. Also, a four year old boy died of starvation in the Gaza Strip. I remember this, I remember all of the details of those stories, of the ones that came before them, of the ones that came after. I have a very good memory. It frightens people, it sometimes frightens me. I can tell you every person who touched an instrument during the making of Pet Sounds in the exact order they appear on the recording, I can tell you who played on every live Coltrane set in existence, I can tell you the points per game average of the 9th guy on the 2007 Minnesota Timberwolves, I can tell you the color,

make, and model of the car parked on the street two houses down the last time my mother walked in the house. I hold on to things that matter to me, my holding onto them signals a sense of importance that I don't trust the rest of the world to honor. And I remember the details of every story out of Gaza, the moments and dates, the faces of children, the families, the demolished homes, the massacres. I retain all of it because I believe it to be important, I think to do otherwise would be to surrender to passive witness, and to be passive about apartheid, to be passive about occupation, is how the framework for genocide is built

- that is in no small part how we arrived in a place where we are watching a genocidal apartheid state starve a population while no one in power does anything, and while many people still act like the world now is the world of ten years ago. And I say this to say that to retain this information, and to do it in a way that orients me towards action and useful rage, means I've had to, many times over many years now, ask myself those questions Saul was getting at. The questions change. Today, one of the questions for me is how anyone can go on while knowing they are watching a genocidal apartheid state starve a population to death. There is not an effective afterlife of this type of witness that I can locate. It takes a part of you that cannot return, even if you think it isn't. The heart atrophies. There are consequences to this, even if you do not believe them to be immediate. Those consequences are not nearly as dire as the actual starvation campaign, the people who are dying from it, and will continue to die from it. The people who have to choose between being murdered in a quest for aid, or dying of starvation. The diminishing of your heart is tied to this, and it is its own crisis. But that crisis is a byproduct of several, expansive, ongoing crises. And as the person responsible for your own heart, what will it take for you to change your priorities? I can't say I ever cared much about awards. I'm not especially ambitious, when it comes to career things. The gratitude I feel for the places my work has been able to go is, most often, gratitude for the individual people it has brought into my life. The people I've been able to reach, many of whom have expanded my ability to overcome the Wanting To Survive In A World That Is Ill-Equipped To Value Life conundrum. But I have found, particularly in the past two years, a growing urgency around shedding any of the hyper-individualistic pursuits that may still linger for me. I want to do nothing, I want to celebrate nothing, unless it brings me in firmer, more principled solidarity and/or friendship and/or community with others. That's it. It takes work to avoid a kind of despair that might lead one towards interpersonal cruelty, and I have seen many people give up on that work. I have had days, personally, where I've given up on that work, and I have to fight to maintain it. I have watched people fracture caring communities, I have watched people dismantle solidarity structures, I have seen people run over each other trying to get to the same place, and I understand it. There is a cost to witness, there is a cost to holding on to the memory of atrocity. My personal priority becomes being principled and rigorous in

whatever it takes to avoid a detached cruelty, which would keep me from others, which would then keep me from action. I guess don't know how some people are just going on with life as normal while watching Israel starve a population and murder aid seekers daily. At any point in the past are of genocide, really. But I am talking especially right now. I try not to spend too much time thinking about it, because it renders me sort of stagnant, and I don't want to look inward in a way that pushes me to de-prioritize action. But I do think about it a little bit. I worry, so much, about the condition of my heart, and yours. Because to go on with life as normal feels like a failure of the heart, which becomes a failure of the mind, which then cuts off a relationship with the reality of the world, and that means there are many people alive who do not care about the world beyond what they can get out of it (and don't just mean power-hungry politicians, I mean everyone, the people living without a care,) and the problem with that which will eventually have to be reckoned with is that there will very soon not be much that can be gotten out of the world. And so what will it take for you to re-assess your priorities? What I loved about being on book tour for a year was that I would be in these rooms with a lot of people and I would sit on the stage and we would do these prolonged q&a/ conversations and we got goofy and weird and had fun but also in almost every room, we talked about Gaza, about Sudan, about abolition, etc. and it was not only good that it was a safe and comfortable space for people to do that, whether the room had 200 people or 1000, but it also signaled this important thing for my heart and brain: I wrote some things and they reached people who care deeply about the world beyond themselves, and we collectively hold each other to that standard in this space. It wasn't on some bullshit like "come to my book tour and forget about the SAD world with EVERYTHING going on that we WONT NAME" And I was moved by this, mostly because I could talk to people from a stage or in a signing line and commiserate about our hearts, what actions we were engaging in (and building cross-state solidarity) - but then, so often, I'd reenter the world and remember that the machine just keeps turning no matter how many bodies get thrown into it. And I think the more people who just surrender to that, who passively witness, who feel absolutely nothing, who say "I just want to not think about this and live my life" and I think about how when the heart atrophies, there is so much of your actual human self that cannot be retrieved. If you are allowing your heart to become useless so that you can "just live your life," you are not living. What will it take to re-align your priorities. I think I have returned to the Lester Bangs quote so often for the past 23 or so years because it concerns me, greatly. It has concerned me so much that I have ended up lying to myself, frequently, even though I haven't wanted to admit it until now-ish. To the question of people still having feelings, I think the answer, broadly, is trending firmly towards "no," or, at least, I am not sure that people have feelings that serve much of a function beyond themselves. And so, to work backwards to the first part of the quote, Bangs asks us to consider what the quality of life must be.

And so I think it is therefore past time to redefine "quality of life," which is what I suppose all of this rambling has been getting at. There is no way - truly no fucking way - to "passively" witness a genocide. Even if you tell yourself whatever you tell yourself in your passivity, it is diminishing you, which is not a passive action. It has material impacts on yourself, on others, on what you believe to be acceptable. On what you allow yourself to not remember. I hope people of heart and conscience have already started to answer it, or their living has answered it for them. I have become comfortable with the fact that there are a lot more things I just do not care about, and can't. I can align myself with the reality of "the most ideal world I dream is not the world I have" but it's a lot harder to go on as normal, caring about career advancement or awards or whatever else when it's actually "we have to watch a population be starved to death, and nothing stops it, not protests, not phone calls, not people setting themselves on fire." Because the question then has to be "how do I re-align my priorities to be the best community member in a time of growing crisis" and that requires, at least for me, finding out what I can let go of to more urgently move me towards action. When June Jordan said "life is action, inaction is death," I take that to mean that action is what repairs the diminishing of the heart, or at least slows it. And it is important for us to choose our actions, to be thoughtful about what our energy is spent on, to ask "what will repair this muscle?" - I, of course, still have my interests and excitements and obsessions and unfortunately you will very often still be subjected to me shouting about, like, my favorite background accessories on 1970s funk album covers or whatever.

That, also, repairs the diminishing of my heart. But principled revolutionary action and solidarity and care is also to priority driving all others. I would like my heart to survive so that my living might be useful to others, even if the world does not value any life, I cannot fall allow myself to fall victim to the world's lack of care or imagination, even if it is seductive to do nothing. Life is action, inaction is death.