

## An Interview with ELAINE SCARRY

THIS INTERVIEW CONTINUES A CONVERSATION that began at the University at Buffalo in 2015 when Elaine Scarry participated in a conference on pain organized by Rachel Ablow and James Bono. At that conference, Professor Scarry delivered a paper on the political consequences of the difficulty of imagining the injuries inflicted by nuclear war. The interview was recorded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on March 27, 2018.

RA: At the Buffalo conference on pain, you gave a paper that built on some of the insights of your then most recent book, *Thermonuclear Monarchy*.<sup>1</sup> In the book, you demonstrate the incompatibility of democracy and nuclear arms at least in part on the grounds that, by the nature of their deployment, nuclear arms make it impossible for the populace to consent to their use. In your talk, you made a different but related claim that focused on the relative silence of the population regarding nuclear arms in the post-Cold War era. You were concerned, in particular, with the difficulties of imagining the consequences of nuclear war. I wonder if you could expand on this second point: why it is so hard to think about nuclear war.

ES: The two points are deeply related. The architecture of nuclear arms requires that the population be eliminated from the decision about going to war. It also requires that Congress be eliminated from the decision about going to war—just because the nature of the technology requires a tiny number of people to do the launch. The result of that architecture is that people eventually, over seven decades, have internalized the fact that they're worthless when it comes to the need to defend the country and to carry out acts of mutual aid toward one another. We now simply abandon the right of self-defense and the right of mutual aid and give unlimited injuring power to the executive branch of government and fall silent.

RA: How much responsibility, how much blame, does one give to the population for remaining silent?

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ABSTRACT In this interview, Elaine Scarry elaborates on her writing and activism in relation to the threat of nuclear war. REPRESENTATIONS 146. Spring 2019 © Rachel Ablow. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 112–34. All rights reserved. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2019.146.1.112>.

ES: That has always been a question. Gandhi said, “You can wake a man who’s asleep, but you can’t wake a man who’s pretending to be asleep.” His statement marks a fork in the road. If the population has been anesthetized and is genuinely asleep, then they are morally innocent (even if infantilized and terribly reduced as moral agents). If instead the population is pretending to be asleep, we are morally culpable: the population is complicit with the genocide that’s standing in the wings waiting to happen. During my lecture and in many years of working on disarmament, I stressed the first path and tried to outline why waking up is difficult. In recent months, I’ve moved closer to the position that your question identifies, the responsibility of the population. I feel the force of Martin Luther King’s statement, “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.” I’m almost at the point of believing that there is a wanton refusal to see the imminent peril, a refusal to understand not just that we have a responsibility to reverse it, to dismantle it, but that we have the ability to do so, and that if we don’t, it is going to happen. I don’t know if it’s going to happen this year. Or whether it’s going to happen this century. But it’s almost inconceivable that it isn’t going to happen.

RA: Why is it that people have such a hard time understanding this? If you allow that people might honestly and ardently be trying to understand, what is it that is getting in the way?

ES: Four or five answers come to mind. First, people often lack key pieces of information. If you ask someone in this country which nations have nuclear weapons, they are likely to say Iraq (which has none), Iran (which has none), or North Korea (which has fewer than 60; leading experts say fewer than 20). The United States has 6,500. The United States and Russia together own 93 percent of the world arsenal: the other 7 percent is owned by the other seven nuclear states—in order of numerical possession, France, China, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea (see fig. 1). An equally profound misconception held by US citizens is the belief that our nuclear architecture is for “defense” and “retaliation.” In fact we have had a “presidential first-use” policy for the whole nuclear age. The profound obscenity of that arrangement, which has only begun to be glimpsed with the current president, has been an equally grave moral wrong from day one.

Second, even when American citizens and residents have this information, the outcome is derealized by its being future—that is, the unreality something has by having not yet happened is conflated with the unreality something might have by being merely imaginary. People, it’s true, are uninformed. But once they *become* informed, even then the flash of insight fades from their eyes after about ten minutes.

## ESTIMATE OF GLOBAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN JANUARY 2018

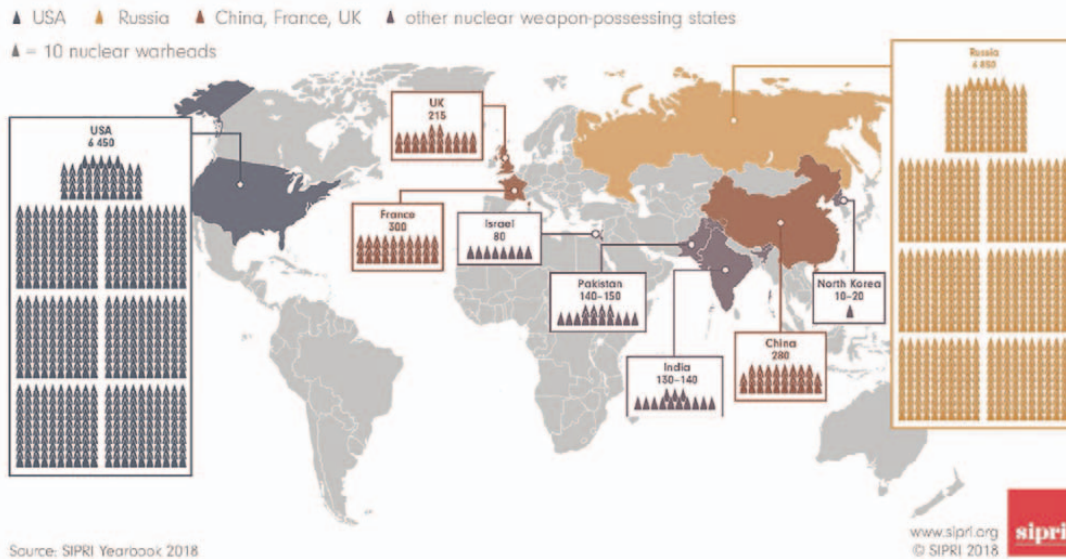


FIGURE 1. “Estimate of Global Nuclear Weapons in January 2018,” in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2018: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security* (Oxford, 2018).

RA: Why do you think that is?

ES: Because they think “future” equals “unreal.” But we need to stop and understand what we mean by “future.” If it takes 10,000 steps to put a nuclear architecture into place, 9,999 steps have already been completed: we know how to split the atom; we know how to provide enriched uranium; we know how to deliver the bomb; we’ve completed not only the theoretical steps but the materialization steps: we’ve made the bombs; we’ve completed the delivery systems—Ohio-class submarines, the land-based ICBMs, and air-delivery B-2s and B-52s. Unlike in China and India, the weapons in the United States are already “mated” to the delivery systems; they are on alert; specific weapons have been assigned to specific cities in the countries of present enemies and, yes, even potential enemies. One step remains: the order to launch. So 9,999 steps are present and accounted for; one remains undone. While the 9,999 steps took vast amounts of time and resources, the last one is designed to be carried out in minutes. The word “future” does not apply to the 9,999 steps, only to the last one.

When people decline to address the nuclear peril on the grounds that it is an “unreal” worry because “following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki it hasn’t yet happened,” they are unknowingly allying themselves

with the position that our own Department of State and Department of Defense took in 1995. At that time, seventy-eight countries asked the International Court of Justice to declare the possession, threat of use, and use of nuclear weapons illegal on the basis of the humanitarian and environmental instruments such as the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Geneva Protocols, the Declaration of Saint Petersburg, the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Poverty, and many others. Though the United States worked to invalidate the application of these protocols to our nuclear weapons one at a time, an argument they used over and over was that the firing of the weapons was “future,” hence “hypothetical,” hence “suppositional”—this despite the billions of dollars that each year go into polishing and oiling the architecture of earth’s destruction to keep it in a *present-tense* state of constant readiness.

RA: At the conference you also spoke about the problem of “statistical compassion.”

ES: Let’s call that the third reason why the population is asleep. American indifference to our own genocidal nuclear architecture comes from the constraints on compassion when large numbers of people stand to be injured. Public health physicians distinguish between narrative compassion (where one or two or three people are at risk) and statistical compassion (where thousands or millions are at risk).<sup>2</sup> We’re fairly good at the first, and have many occasions to strengthen our capacity through daily acts of friendship and from reading literature. We’re terrible at the second, and have almost no training in strengthening our feeble abilities in this region. The nuclear peril of course entails the second: recent work on nuclear winter by Alan Robock and his colleagues shows that if even a small fraction of the current world arsenal is fired (one one-hundredth of one percent of the total available blast power), forty-four million people will be casualties on the first afternoon and one billion in the weeks following. The small shrug people make when the subject of nuclear weapons comes up—the little lift and fall of the shoulders—means they have just run a quick check on their interior brain-and-soul equipment and can report: nope, nothing in there in the way of statistical compassion.

RA: Narrative compassion and statistical compassion seem to take place in widely separate spheres. How then do you see them coming into conflict with each other?

ES: For me, a frightening example occurred in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, the wholly admirable body that sets the Doomsday Clock (now at two

minutes to midnight) and that works round the clock to educate the people of the United States and the world about the hazards of nuclear weapons. Yet in commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing in August of 2015, they published a historically factual narrative about the pilots of the plane delivering the atom bomb to Nagasaki, how many things went wrong and had to be repaired midflight. The lead-in read, “A typhoon was coming, the fuel pump failed, they had to switch planes, things were wired incorrectly, they missed their rendezvous, they couldn’t see the primary target, they ran out of gas on the way home, and they had to crash-land.” But the worst part was when “the Fat Man atomic bomb started to arm itself, mid-flight.”<sup>3</sup> The story, narrated in edge-of-your-seat suspense, is an example of narrative compassion utterly preempting the possibility of statistical compassion: the crew might die, but if they had in fact died over the Pacific, tens of thousands of persons would not have been burned into nonexistence that day.

RA: Your emphasis at the conference was on the nature of physical pain itself.

ES: Yes, that was my central subject. In terms of our conversation now, we can say that a fourth and fifth reason for indifference arise from the difficulty of comprehending pain, whether it takes place in one person’s body or in the bodies of millions, and whether it occurs in the past, present, or future. (But if I were listing the reasons in the order of importance, these two would be near the top.) Once we exhaust a small handful of adjectives for physical pain, two (and almost only two) metaphors arise: the metaphor of the weapon (one may say it feels as though a knife is sticking in my shoulder blade even if it isn’t); and that of body damage (one may say it feels as though my elbow has snapped in two, even if it hasn’t). *The Body in Pain* concentrates on problems arising from the first; a later essay (“Among Schoolchildren”) concentrates on the second.<sup>4</sup>

Both metaphors, if carefully controlled, can help us understand the felt experience of another person’s pain; but both are highly volatile and can lead us far away from understanding. An example of the benign or genuinely expressive potential is provided by findings in neuroscience that we have mirror neurons that help us recognize another person’s physical pain. When you look at the actual experiments that were done, however, you see that the test subject is asked not to listen to a sufferer’s report of pain but to observe, for example, a pin being stuck into someone’s hand or the administration of a small electric shock. The experiments show not our comprehension of another person’s pain but our recognition of the aversiveness of being subjected to a weapon—often closely related to but by no means identical with physical pain.

The very fact that a weapon can be separated from the site of the injury means that the attributes of pain can be lifted away from the sufferer and conferred on the agents inflicting the harm, so now it is not the pain that is world destroying but the inflictor of the pain. There are many examples of this in the case of nuclear weapons. For example, the mushroom cloud is often regarded as “awesome,” some even say “sublime.” But the *hibakasha*, the survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, say, “We saw no mushroom cloud.” A mushroom cloud is what you see if you’re an observer far away, seated high in the sky in the airplane that dropped the weapon, or standing on the ground scores of miles beyond the radius of the harm.

Like any sensible mortal, I admire J. Robert Oppenheimer, but his endlessly quoted statement following the Trinity test, “I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture . . . I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,” allows the scale of the injury to be transferred across the weapon and conferred on the agents, who now perceive themselves as magnificent, thrilling, almighty in their power. Oppenheimer even prefaces the quotation by saying that Vishnu here takes on a multi-armed form “to impress” the prince. The name he chose for the test, “Trinity,” shows this same fabrication of godlikeness. What if instead Oppenheimer had said, “I remembered the goddess Guanyin whose name means ‘The one who perceives the sounds of the world’ and the sounds I heard were excruciating cries, unbearable shrieks of tens of thousands scalded together in an instant of molten flesh.” The first statement is a fiction: Oppenheimer is neither a multi-armed god nor a three-personed god; the second statement (could we hear Guanyin) is accurate; if we could internalize and practice the second statement, we would disarm immediately.

The image of the nuclear weapon, which might help make visible the pain and suffering it will bring about, instead captures the gigantic scale of the suffering, only to lift that “giganticism” away from the site of suffering altogether and confer it on the human agents—ordinary men, small in stature and in number, but who now appear gigantic. Insofar as any shred of “suffering” still remains visible, we believe it is the suffering of the now-gigantic human agent who is in mighty peril. Thus the nation spends billions of dollars on a presidential fallout shelter while convincing the public that fallout shelters for the population are ridiculous. In *Thinking in an Emergency*, and again in *Thermonuclear Monarchy*, I contrast the Swiss shelter system—Swiss law requires that every house have a fallout shelter;<sup>5</sup> the law was reaffirmed in a 2003 referendum that had an 80 percent turnout at the polls—with the staggering constructions that have been made in the United States for . . . the people? no—for the president and those close to him, a shelter inside a mountain, with buildings and a lake that is, according to observers, large enough for waterskiing. One country, Switzerland,

believes in what the Swiss call “equality of survival”; the other country, the United States, believes that only the agents of nuclear holocaust deserve the chance for survival. Much more detail on the multiple presidential fallout shelters is described by Garrett M. Graff in a recent book, *Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government’s Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die*. The nuclear architecture requires that either the weapon be invisible (buried in a submarine or buried in a cornfield, like the 450 ICBMs) or, when it is visible, it must become the path across which the magnificent prowess of the human agent is seen—he’s so thrilling, so important, so vulnerable; here, please, take my tax money, use all of it to protect the man who will launch our nuclear missiles. What should bring us to our knees in sorrow and shame instead brings about a dutiful salute to the thermonuclear monarch.

If one thinks fallout shelters for the population are ridiculous (ignoring the fact that the medically sophisticated Swiss have data showing otherwise), then it is informative to contrast the money lavished on our nuclear architecture with ordinary forms of safety structures for the population like bridges, dams, roads, levees. The American Society of Civil Engineers, in their 2017 report on infrastructure, gave our bridges a “C+” (56,000 are “structurally deficient”), our dams a “D” (2000 have a “high-hazard potential”), our levees a “D” (\$80 billion is needed for structural repair), and our roads a “D” (one out of every five miles of highway pavement is “in poor condition”).<sup>6</sup> Might Americans be given a choice on whether they want their taxes spent on infrastructure or—as is currently the case—on nuclear weapons and presidential fallout shelters? Or has “no taxation without representation” disappeared along with all our other basic democratic principles?

RA: That all follows from the instability of the weapon; what about the second field of representation, body damage?

ES: The phenomenon of body damage is like the image of the weapon but works in a much different way—almost the opposite. Whereas the problem of the weapon is its very separability from the body (and the way to make it benign is to retether it to its referent in the body), the problem of body damage is that it overlaps, overrides, and eclipses the personhood of the one underneath the damage. Either one looks away, or, if one looks, one recoils. Visual artists and writers—from Peter Paul Rubens and Andrea Mantegna in the Renaissance to fin de siècle artists Käthe Kollwitz, Aubrey Beardsley, Edvard Munch, Joris-Karl Huysmans, to twentieth-century Guatemalan writer Miguel Asturias—all solve this problem by finding a way to double the location, so that personhood remains intact in our perceptual field even if the human body is at that moment being obscenely shredded.

If you visit the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, you will probably find yourself, as I did, surrounded by young schoolchildren, who look with courage on the visages of those who were incompletely incinerated in the bombing of that city (see figs. 2, 3, and 4). In the United States, few adults face up to the faces of those harmed there. In February of 2016, the Central Square Library in Cambridge agreed to let me—and Joseph Gerson, an American Friends Service colleague—do a monthlong program on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with weekly lectures and an exhibit of books, drawings, and photographs. The morning after we put up the exhibit, we found all the photographs of injuries had been removed. The effort to put on an exhibit about Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the Smithsonian Institution in 1994 led to such controversy that it had to be canceled—with one exception: the *Enola Gay* (the plane that delivered the bomb) was put on display. Here we circle back to the phenomenon of the weapon being perceptually severed from the site of the pain. It's in part because of museums like those in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that so many people in the Japanese population are passionately in support of nuclear disarmament. In preparation for a disarmament demonstration in New York, Cambridge and Boston activists (I include myself) worked for months to bring supporters to the march: after endless work, approximately one hundred did so. But one thousand Japanese men and women arrived that morning in New York; they carried a petition signed by six million of their countrymen, who collectively paid for the travel costs of the thousand who came.

RA: Can you provide any examples of authors who “double the location,” as you have just described, “so that personhood remains intact” while the “human body is being . . . shredded”?

ES: Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize* begins with a heroic Indian in Guatemala, who ordinarily protects his people no matter what; he is able to do so, in part, because he has a level of sensory acuity that approaches genius. He knows the scent of every flower; he can discern the whole recipe of scents present in the forest in any given moment. The European colonizers can commit a slaughter of his people only if they can divert this heroic leader; and the only way to divert him is to subject him to horrible, scalding, obscene pain. Asturias must convey to us the felt experience of pain, the turning of the body inside out, and he chooses to do this through the associated phenomenon of body damage; but in order to do so without eclipsing the personhood of Gaspar Ilóm, he decouples the body damage from the hero. The book opens with a dog, which the invaders have used as a test case for their pain-inducing poison laced with glass. The dog, in excruciating pain, zooms hysterically through the village square, covered with open sores,





FIGURE 2. Schoolchildren visiting the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.



FIGURE 3. Schoolchildren viewing display in the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.



FIGURE 4. Photographs of survivors of the atomic bomb in the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.

his penis erect, howling in a way that is aversive to everyone who hears and sees. This horrible scene conveys the obscenity of pain, the obscenity of bodily damage. By obscenity, I mean interior substances in the body which come before us without our consent, come before us before we are mentally prepared to comprehend what we are seeing. But the story separates this bodily desecration from the person, for now, having seen the dog, we need only be told that Gaspar Ilóm has drunk this glass-laced poison to understand why he abandons his post, submerges himself in the lake, drinks all its waters, and eventually comes out. He has survived. But during the moments when he disappeared below the surface of the water, his people have been slain.

RA: I wonder how you think about the role of the visual in that context. Do you think of the visual as akin to a language?

ES: In visual art one can see the same phenomenon taking place, as when Käthe Kollwitz refuses to let an injured victim be portrayed as what Shelley called “a monstrous lump of ruin.” In her 1900 etching and aquatint *The Downtrodden*, she pushes the wounds on the body just beyond the body’s edge onto a linen sheet on which the person is lying. These mouthlike, liplike structures of open wounds are there but are not permitted to compromise

our recognition of the sufferer's personhood. Even somebody like Aubrey Beardsley, in one of his posters, puts the wound in a tree rather than on the body of the woman. And yet the woman has attributes that make the viewer see the analogy, just like Marty South and the trees in your account of Hardy's *The Woodlanders* [Scarry is referring to Rachel Ablow's account in *Victorian Pain*]. Her posture, for example, is exaggeratedly erect and treelike. She wears a high-waisted skirt that is made to be a visual analogy with the tree. But our perception of her personhood remains uninterrupted.

RA: One issue you have raised recently is the particular difficulty of thinking about the specific kinds of injuries caused by nuclear war, namely burns. There was a striking moment in your talk when you discussed the protocols used in burn units to help doctors and nurses in looking at burn victims. It seems so intuitively right that caretakers would have difficulty looking at these patients. It seems to suggest something about the limits on the imagination in terms of suffering. I'm wondering what it is about burns that makes it so hard to imagine the suffering they entail. Is it about the skin as the site of humanity? Is it about the face?

ES: It is the visage. Without preparation and help, when we see the complete mutilation of the body, especially the face, we mistakenly feel we are seeing the mutilation of personhood. The "rule of nines" is devised to enable rescue workers *to look* at a gravely burned person and (instead of having their own minds shut down in sorrow and confusion and revulsion) *to assess* instantly the gravity of the injury, start appropriate treatment, and report the scale of the injury to the hospital awaiting the person's arrival. Each part of the body is assigned an easy-to-remember number that is a multiple of nine (see fig. 5). Counting forms a key part in many forms of emergency rescue, and this is one instance. The numbers, once totaled, tell the rescuer the next step, such as whether to insert an IV for fluid resuscitation.

The need to train the perceptions of those who hope to help those who are burned is also illustrated by a procedure called "staying." During the years when I was part of a research group on suffering at the Hastings Center for Ethics, I heard a lecture by a physician-nurse who worked in a burn unit. She mentioned that because of the difficulty of looking at a severely burned person, nurses assigned to burn units may begin to avert their eyes when speaking with a patient, decline to touch the patient, or stand at a greater distance each day, or request a transfer after a few days. To counteract these problems, caretakers can participate in a class on "staying" where they recognize the temptation to withdraw from the patient and practice trying to overcome that withdrawal.

While the "rule of nines" and "staying" are brilliant inventions, we should recognize that in nuclear war there will be few rescue workers and

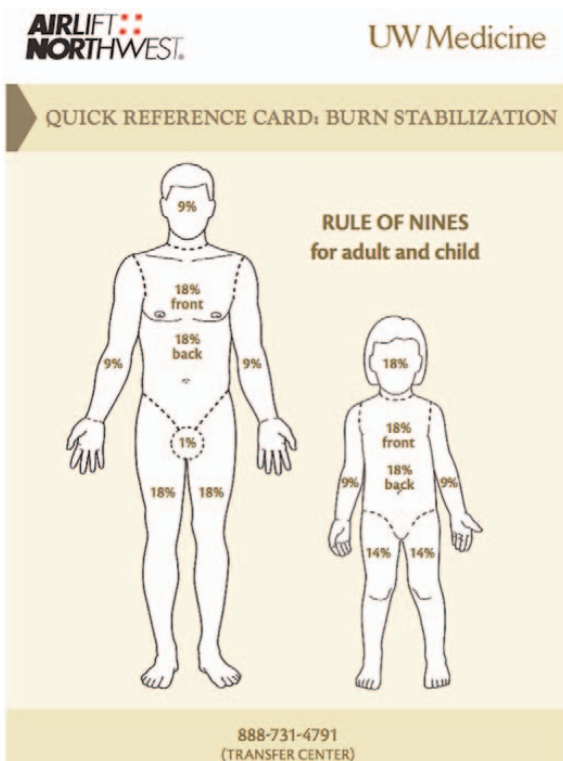


FIGURE 5. Pocket card showing “Rule of Nines for Adult and Child,” Northwest Healthcare Response Network, <https://nwhrn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Burn-Pocket-Card.pdf>.

nurses. A study in the Netherlands of what would happen if a terrorist brought into Rotterdam a very small 12 kg weapon (the size used in World War II) found that of those who had not immediately evaporated, four thousand persons would require burn beds.<sup>7</sup> They noted that in all of the Netherlands there are only a hundred burn beds.

A leading hospital in Boston, Mass General, has seven burn beds. The burn beds themselves—what few there are—will disappear in a nuclear strike. On the floor of the UK Parliament, the possession of four Trident submarines has repeatedly been justified by the potential need to bomb Moscow. In response, a Scottish study by John Ainslie looked at the scale of damage that would actually take place if a nuclear missile were launched against the Ministry of Defense building in Moscow: along with the Ministry of Defense, four major hospitals would be destroyed and four others subjected to fire and radiation that would make them inoperable. Thirty-one schools would also be destroyed with at least 700,000 children slain.<sup>8</sup> If the missile is larger, so, too, will the disappearance of hospitals be larger. An article by Steven Starr, Lynn Eden, and Theodore A. Postol in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* shows that if an 800-kiloton weapon were detonated above Manhattan, the center of the blast would be four times the temperature of the sun, and, within “tens of minutes,” a firestorm will cover 90 to 150 square miles.

RA: Was the artistic strategy that you just described of doubling the location so as to protect personhood apparent in the real-world examples you were citing, the Nagasaki children, the “rule of nines,” “staying”?

ES: I think so. It is not accidental that the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum is itself physically beautiful in its architecture, or that as you enter you pass lavish cascades of paper cranes, inspired by the child Sadako Sasaki, like cherry blossoms in spring, or that you see an inscription about Nagasaki’s exceptional generosity to outsiders—its many centuries of open trade with foreign companies, a level of cosmopolitan hospitality not at that time found to the same degree in other regions of Japan; you see engraved inscriptions from Dwight D. Eisenhower and from the “United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Summary Report (Pacific War), July 1946” saying unequivocally that the atom bomb was not needed to end the war. All these elements, and many others, keep the personhood of the city’s inhabitants in view, side-by-side with the excruciating vision of burnt faces. The “rule of nines” lets one reconstruct the body out of a beneficent invention, toylike in its simplicity. In “staying,” the very name of the procedure holds the injury within the frame of sympathetic personhood.

RA: Let’s return to Ghandi’s forking path. You’ve sketched the reasons why the US population is innocently sleeping. But what if they’re feigning sleep?

ES: I am sometimes floored by the discrepancy between the attention we give to injuries that have happened when we *can’t* do anything to change them and the attention we give to injuries that haven’t yet happened when by intervention we absolutely *can* prevent them. I don’t know how to explain this. I have always assumed that those acts of trying to talk about the pain of torture victims in the 1970s in my case, or the pain of people in World War II, the Holocaust, that those acts are meant to act as a warning to the future. What is our motive for thinking about the unchangeable injuries of the past if not to increase our ability to prevent such injuries in the future? Yet almost incomprehensible is the distance between the willingness to think about events from the past we can’t possibly change and the complete comfort with feeling that future massacres need not concern us. Or worse, that one is slightly superior to protesting a wrong: intellectually superior because the moral wrong is an obvious moral wrong, and we only like to address sophisticated, hard to discern moral wrongs. It might be embarrassing to have to stand on a street corner with a sign or attend a public meeting.

Imagine, though, if we forgave the complicity with past acts of enslavement or genocide by saying, “People saw that it was wrong, but they considered it too intellectually obvious, too compromising of their dignity, to have

to stand up and protest.” Or take the argument that the aspiration to dismantle nuclear weapons is now many decades old, and we must turn to fresh undertakings: imagine that someone tried to defend those who tolerated slavery in 1860 because they had been hearing antislavery sentiment since 1820 and now considered such sentiments “stale.” We would never give a “pass” to anyone in the past who excused their inattention to slavery or the transfer of people to concentration camps on either of those two grounds; yet we believe such arguments release us from addressing weapons whose outcome is instant genocide. There are historical periods in which people were dissuaded from protesting because dissidents were beaten (Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate) or killed (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany). No such beatings or death threats excuse our own silence today.

RA: Staying with this point about the relative ease of imagining pain past as opposed to pain in the future, do you attribute that to sentimentality? It sounds so reprehensible put in those terms. I wonder how you account for it.

ES: I think you are right to worry that our attention to the past begins to look like sentimentality. The argument is sometimes made by academics that sympathy is less about compassion or the desire to ameliorate pain than it is a kind of cultural signaling of our moral goodness. To me that thesis seems horrifying: it lets the many who ignore past pain excuse their own inattention on the grounds that the few who *do* attend to pain are only doing so to announce their own goodness. So I feel a strong aversion to that argument; it works to reduce still further the number of those who show any wish to help. However, if it turns out that we only speak about irremediable injuries from the past while a huge architecture of massacre stands waiting to be used, then one has to ask oneself: why were we looking at injuries in the distant past? Is it just sentimentality? Is it just cultural signaling?

RA: That specific problem provides an interesting segue to an op-ed piece I read this morning by John Paul Stevens calling for the rescinding of the Second Amendment in the wake of the student protests in favor of gun safety.<sup>9</sup> He clearly marks that it’s the victims who are speaking and that we need to listen to them. I was struck by the timing of the piece because I know that part of your argument about the illegality of nuclear weapons rests on the Second Amendment. We’re at a moment where it seems like there’s a groundswell of support for limits on the right to bear arms. I’m wondering if that throws a monkey wrench into your claims regarding the illegality of nuclear arms on the basis of their incompatibility with the Second Amendment?

ES: Day by day I have ever-diminishing belief that we can disentangle the true meaning of the right to bear arms from the terrible uses to which it's been put; it's now so far gone, maybe even hopeless. Just contrast it with the other major brake on nuclear weapons provided by the constitutional requirement for the congressional declaration of war. There is now the Markey-Lieu bill (on the eve of its formulation, my brother and I went to Congress and spoke with Senator Markey, Representative Lieu, and others in the Senate and House on the need for Congress to act on this constitutional provision). The Markey-Lieu bill states explicitly that the Constitution gives Congress the right to declare war. No president can launch a first-use missile in the absence of the declaration of war and without specific authorization for the launch. Many people in the House [55 as of May 2019] have now cosponsored it and thirteen in the Senate.<sup>10</sup> It seems like a utopian piece of legislation—that is, it seems like it can't possibly pass. But the *New York Times* has several times celebrated it, which is amazing, because in earlier years they tended to focus on other countries' nuclear weapons rather than our own; this year they have repeatedly focused on the scandalous scale of the US arsenal and our presidential launch arrangements. The right to bear arms: I think it would be terrible if it were eliminated.

RA: Can you say more as to why? This is a somewhat counterintuitive claim.

ES: The Second Amendment, if properly understood and acted upon, makes nuclear weapons illegal and should be used in the courts to require the country to dismantle its missiles. At the beginning of our conversation I mentioned that we are no longer called upon to participate in, and hence make decisions about, whether our country goes to war: we simply wait for a television report about whether “we” are at war. Nor is there any way that we, or any other human being or animal or plant on earth can defend ourselves against an incoming missile. We have lost the right of self-defense. The right of self-defense is arguably the right underlying every other right: free speech matters for a thousand reasons, but the primary reason is that it enhances my ability to protect myself; so, too, with many of the other rights, such as fair trial and due process and the right to vote. The Second Amendment specifies that it is up to the US population to defend the country and to make decisions about whether the country ever acts to injure a foreign population. The Second Amendment does not say whether the country will have a large supply of conventional arms, a small supply, or no arsenal at all; it's prior to that question. It says, in effect, “however much injuring power we have, authority over its use will be equally divided across all the citizens.” Like taxation, like voting, it's a distributive amendment. (Initially it applied to all male white

citizens but was eventually extended to the rest of us.) If a sizable portion of us have to be persuaded that there are strong reasons to go to war, that's a strong brake, a strong test, of whether we ought to go to war. Right now, there are no brakes. The Second Amendment's repudiation of a "standing army" is a repudiation of any military force that serves at the discretion of the executive without the sanction of the citizenry. A nuclear weapon is everything that was detested (and regarded as illegal) in the "standing army."

RA: Do you think that meaning is recoverable?

ES: The idea has been completely obscured in the nuclear age and is now so widely misunderstood—seeming to license machine guns in reckless hands turned on fellow citizens—that it may be easier to eliminate the amendment and start over, as thousands of people have said, and most clearly the high school students in Parkland, Florida. Though you would have trouble getting such a repeal of the amendment through Congress, once you did so, I imagine it might be ratified by the population because people are rightly horrified by the American use of guns. According to recent articles, 187,000 schoolchildren have been in a school where there was gun violence.

Right now it seems there are only two alternatives: keep the right to bear arms and continue to witness shootings in schools, streets, and workplaces, or repeal the right to bear arms altogether. But there is a third alternative: the left has to listen to the right, and the right has to listen to the left. At present, we're not on speaking terms on this issue: each side holds the other in contempt. But there may be threads of truth on both sides out of which a weave of shared comprehension could be arrived at. Ours is a citizenry that needs to relearn what courage is, and it's not shooting schoolchildren, and it's not firing nuclear missiles at the innocent citizenry of a foreign nation.

RA: Due to a prior engagement you were not able to be at the entirety of the conference. As a result, you missed speakers' repeated references to the importance of your work. Darius Rejali, in particular, insisted that when *The Body in Pain* was published, people weren't really talking about torture as a central problem. They were talking about it as a specialist issue. One of the things your book did was make torture seem central to thinking about pain and to thinking about war. That really struck me, for—as with so many of the things we've talked about so far—there's nothing self-evident about your decision to consider torture. If you wanted to talk about pain, illness might be a more obvious place to start. And that's where a lot of people start, just because it's a much more universal experience—as opposed to torture, which is pretty marginal in the sense that it affects a small percentage of



the population by comparison. So I wonder if you could talk about why you started where you did.

ES: Going to illness—one hopes that would be the natural thing. I have to say that when I first started to work on this, people would come up with bizarre ideas, often involving instances that had no bearing on pain. Anyway, there's a very simple answer to your question and that is that, like everybody, I would get in the mail letters from Amnesty International. I kept wondering how could they get me, sitting (as I was then) in Philadelphia, to understand what's happened to somebody in Chile—and do so without slipping into sensationalizing it, or taking advantage of it. So I arranged to go to Amnesty's International Secretariat in London. At that point I had no idea that torture would be the first subject I would talk about in the book. I went there because I wanted to talk to them about how they had figured out how to do that—how to tell me about the pain someone somewhere in the world was experiencing. When I got there the director just said, I don't have a clue how we got there. We didn't really think about it. We just did it. And then he said, but you're welcome to use our library with all our documents in it. So the ostensible reason for going there was not what actually eventually happened. I spent time reading all the documents in their library. Instead of thinking about how Amnesty International used language, although I still kept thinking about that, I began thinking about how language was being used inside torture itself, where there is always a physical act and always a verbal act, and the verbal act is a pretense; the torturer pretends there's some information at issue, that he desperately needs, that warrants this cruelty. It's not accidental that if we just fast-forward to US torture in the twenty-first century, how much those acts of torture came to be licensed by the ticking-bomb scenario, the completely false, preposterous ticking-bomb scenario. I'd be happy to denounce that at length if you'd like to hear it, but I've already done so in an essay called "Five Errors in the Reasoning of Alan Dershowitz."<sup>11</sup>

RA: The ticking time-bomb scenario is all about justifying torture on the assumption that torture will produce truthful language. Why do you think we keep returning to that false notion? We all know that's not the way torture works. It's been documented again and again. Even when torture victims are producing truthful language, it's usually so mixed up with untruthful language that the victims themselves may not even know the difference: conditions on the ground have changed, or else they may be disoriented by their suffering. We know this is an unrealistic scenario.

ES: Yes. In the rare case when interrogators *do* get a piece of potentially accurate information, they then often spend five months trying to validate it; by the

time it's affirmed, the so-called "lead" has long since disappeared. Gerald Posner's *Why America Slept* describes such an instance that occurred when the alleged al Qaeda terrorist Abu Zubayda was subjected to "false flag" torture.

RA: So why do we keep holding on to the false idea that inflicting intense pain will elicit true information?

ES: The mistake arises because, as I show in *The Body in Pain*, across the relentlessly displayed weapon, the attributes of the person in pain are transferred to the torturer. It seems as though the person inflicting the pain, the agent, has got an immense world, one so important that he must act on that world's behalf and ask his questions; but it is instead the prisoner's pain, not the torturer's world, that is colossal in scale. Once the prisoner's pain is given voice, the pretense of the torturer's motive stands revealed as the threadbare phenomenon it is; the passive voice is under-credited in our world, under-listened-to; but once it is heard, the truths it is telling are almost self-evident.

RA: Could you say more? I'm not sure I follow.

ES: Gradually, as I studied the documents from many countries, I realized what I was looking at: the upside-down version of something that in its positive version was almost wholly good, the structure of creation. Torture was an incredible aping, a dismantling into a false, wholly inverted, picture. Because all physical pain entails the felt experience of being acted upon, the prisoner's experience helps us understand what sufferers endure even if they are in the comparatively benign world of home or physician's care. Some physicians have said that the book gave them a new understanding of the person in pain. For me, it was just putting one foot in front of another. Here's this thing, and it's red; here's this thing, and it's black, and so forth. Maybe people who were surprised by it weren't used to perceiving the world from the underside, I'm even tempted to say from the female side of things. From the passive-voice side of things. From there the picture unfolds, and that's the answer to your earlier question about what struck you as the surprising range of my writings, which are instead (in my mind) unitary.

The two central subjects of my work are the nature of physical injury and the nature of human creation. *The Body in Pain* brings the subjects of injuring and creating together. It argues that the willful infliction of pain and injury is the opposite of creation, since it apes and inverts the ordinary work of the imagination. The book is subtitled *The Making and Unmaking of the World*. The first half describes the structure of "unmaking" that takes places in torture and war; the second half seeks to identify the structure of

“making” both as a mental act (imagining) and as a material act (creating). *On Beauty and Being Just* also brings the two together by arguing that beauty and justice are alike in having “injury” or “injustice” as the thing that is their opposite and that they together work to diminish. My other writings—rather than explicitly bringing the subjects of injuring and creating together—instead emphasize *either* injuring *or* creating. Injury is the subject of *Thermonuclear Monarchy*. Injury, or its prevention, is also the subject of two other books, *Who Defended the Country?* and *Rule of Law, Misrule of Men*, and articles such as the series of essays in the *New York Review of Books* on three major plane crashes.<sup>12</sup> Creation is the subject of my other writings, which fall into three categories: those that deal with imagining or *mental* creation (for example *Dreaming by the Book*), those that deal with *material* creation (essays on embodiment in Donne, Hardy, Rilke, Proust), and those that address the relation between *mental* imagining and *material* creation (such as the essay “The Made-Up and the Made-Real”).<sup>13</sup>

RA: At this point I’d like to shift focus in order to ask you about how you think about your work as a scholar and literary critic in relation to your political work. You recently published a book on Shakespeare’s sonnets.<sup>14</sup> How do you move from the one project to the other? Part of what’s behind the question—other than my astonishment at the range of your work—is a question that I think a lot of scholars are grappling with right now: in a moment of such crisis, how do we think about the work of scholarship? It feels like there’s such urgency to the political work. How do we put that aside in order to do this other work that we all believe is valuable but may feel less immediately pressing.

ES: The Shakespeare book—that was something that just literally arrived in my lap, unsolicited. I wasn’t trying to figure out who Shakespeare’s beloved was. I was (this is back in the mid-1990s) just reading all of Shakespeare’s poems and plays with images of flowers. It happens that Sonnet 99 is about how all the flowers have stolen their attributes from you, my beloved. And then the footnote said, it’s well known that this is taken from a poem by Henry Constable. So Shakespeare is saying that the flowers are taking their attributes from you, my beloved, at the very moment his poem is taking its flowers from Henry Constable! I was stunned; I sat there as though struck by lightning.

I began working on this mystery long before I completed *Thermonuclear Monarchy*. It could have turned out that as soon as I looked into who Henry Constable was, it became clear that he had nothing to do with Shakespeare. It could have happened that every piece of evidence I looked at failed to support the hypothesis. Instead, the opposite took place. Shakespeare talks about the man who sleeps with his female beloved and Henry Constable talks about

having slept with the female partner of his male beloved. Shakespeare talks about a rival poet, and Henry Constable is intimately involved with the poet-king James VI of Scotland; they write love poems to each other. Crucially, King James has all the attributes that Shakespeare assigns to the figure called “the rival poet.” Maybe five years into this twenty-year-long project, I realized that all the lines in Shakespeare’s sonnets that say, “My lover’s name is shining bright in this line” have Henry Constable’s name right there. I put that material at the front of the book. Maybe I should have postponed it for the third or fourth chapter, since it sometimes distracts readers from all the other forms of evidence. That is just one genre among many genres of evidence: thing after thing after thing coincided and confirmed that Henry Constable was Shakespeare’s beloved.

But the larger question you ask is about why someone trying to prevent nuclear war would stop to write about Shakespeare. It’s for the same reason that one works in the garden; it is nourishing and restores one’s trust in the world. It makes it possible not to feel overwhelmed, crushed, by the prospect of injury. People always cite that statement from Hobbes that life is nasty, brutish, and short; but what Hobbes actually says is, *if you destroy the social contract*, then life is nasty, brutish, and short. Before he gets to that line he enumerates art, civilization, ships, longitude and latitude: all these dazzling things that over many centuries we’ve made and that will be gone if we tear up the social contract. The social contract includes Shakespeare, along with a million other things; that is what will be gone.

When I was an undergraduate, I wrote my senior thesis on the difficulty of reconciling the public and the private in Shakespeare’s Roman plays. In a way, your question is about the way one brings together one’s public or political obligation with one’s own personal delight in the world. Often one of the two gets sacrificed for the other, but sometimes each can strengthen the other. One of my teachers once told me that everything I’ve since written was already present in my senior thesis. I certainly hope that’s not correct, but the need to be true to the private and the public, that need has surely remained.

RA: Do you feel there’s a connection between your literary and your political projects? As a Victorianist I’m especially interested in the fact that you wrote your dissertation on William Makepeace Thackeray and then went on to write *The Body in Pain*. That is not a self-evident trajectory.

ES: If you take any two pieces of writing I’ve done, it might be hard to discern the bridge between them, but if you look at the writings as a whole, there is an immediately visible continuity. Let me answer, though, focusing just on the early writings you’ve named. Thackeray was one of several projects that I did in graduate school that were about the different notions

of truth people hold and how they get those notions into language. I worked on Thackeray; I did a piece on Samuel Beckett; I worked for a full year on Boethius—three very different ideas of what truth is and three very different ways of getting that conception of truth into language. I was even then slowly realizing that the problems posed to the limits of language weren't coming from abstract notions of truth. They were coming from the other end: things that were too concrete to get into language. Even at that time I had begun to be interested in the problem of pain. As soon as I got a job I began to work on pain—and I was assisted by the fact that at that time no one (as far as I could see) was getting tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, so it didn't even occur to me to think the thought, what can I do to get tenure? It was instead, what do I want to work on? Even though the Thackeray was about how you get into narrative this kind of tremendous skepticism about both objective truth and subjective truth, it's the same question of how you represent something and what the consequences are if you can't represent it.

We are trained in literature to read and to imagine, and to listen to people. Last semester I asked both the students in my graduate seminar "On Beauty" and the students in my undergraduate course "The Brontës" why we read literature. As a department we're beginning to walk into the task of redesigning our own curriculum. The graduate answers were just gorgeous. I asked them to write and hand in an account in the next week. But the undergraduates, I just asked them to describe their answers on the spot. Many of the accounts—in both seminars—had to do with being able to see other minds, not just in the text but in the classroom: getting to watch other people's minds at work, how they think, how amazing it is to have the chance to see a fellow student's mental picture of the mental pictures in the mind of a person in a book. I have often thought that the answer to certain unsolved problems, let's say certain illnesses, might already be there in the medical literature. If you just put all the articles in a building and sent in some readers—Readers with an upper case *R*—they would see that an answer, unrecognized, kept coming up. When Edward Said had his MLA Presidential Forum, I had the opportunity to say what I abidingly believe: we have the obligation to look at these instances of injury just because no one is exempt from looking. But then we have a special additional obligation because we are trained both in reading and in research. It heightens the obligation.<sup>15</sup>

RA: I've taken a lot of your time, but I would like to ask if you're working on any new projects.

ES: I have a set of obligations that seemed small when I accepted them, but no obligation is small. I'm working on style in *Wuthering Heights* because

someone, Daniel Taylor in the United Kingdom, asked me to, and I thought, sure that's an easy thing to do. [Laughter] But once those obligations are completed, I hope to finish two projects that came out of lecture series in earlier years. In 2007 I gave the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, on imagining color. I so much want to come back to that. But here we're carried back to your question about Shakespeare, because imagining color is an aesthete's project. It's even narrower than the questions asked in *Dreaming by the Book* that address many different kinds of mental image making such as solid walls and moving pictures. This is just color. I also gave a set of lectures at Stanford on poetry and deliberation, about how tied together the two of them are. At the end of the first book of the *Iliad*, the muses feast and speak in counterpoint. There's strong evidence—both in Eastern Islamic poetry and in Western medieval poetry—that this pro and con format of debate and deliberation has long been at the heart of poetry.

But right now almost everything I do outside of teaching addresses the urgent need for nuclear disarmament. This work has entailed large-scale projects such as cochairing a conference at Harvard, “Presidential First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Is it Legal? Is it Constitutional? Is it Just?”<sup>16</sup> It also entails single lectures at universities in the United States as well as other countries and many, many talks to small gatherings in churches and other public spaces. I often feel I am speaking on a frequency that is not a frequency my listeners' ears can receive. The only solution is to keep trying other frequencies in the hope that my words will eventually become audible. That's why *Thermonuclear Monarchy* begins with the lines of a poem, “When you hear the clams calling / to the moon / To change the tides / I'd be interested in that kind of underworld.”<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

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1. Elaine Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing Between Democracy and Doom* (New York, 2014).
2. The term “statistical compassion” was invented by Walsh McDermott, a physician in the Department of Public Health at the Cornell University Medical College.
3. “The Present and the Past: Nuclear Weapons in 2015,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 27, 2015, <https://thebulletin.org/2015/12/the-present-and-the-past-nuclear-weapons-in-2015/>. Ellen Bradbury and Sandra Blakeslee, “The Harrowing Story of the Nagasaki Bombing Mission,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 4, 2015, <https://thebulletin.org/2015/08/the-harrowing-story-of-the-nagasaki-bombing-mission/>.
4. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985); Elaine Scarry, “Among Schoolchildren: The Representation of Physical

- Pain in Verbal and Visual Art,” in *Pain and Its Transformations*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Kay Shelemay (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 279–316.
5. Elaine Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency* (New York, 2011); Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy*.
  6. American Society of Civil Engineers 2017 Infrastructure Report Card, <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org>.
  7. Wilbert van der Zeijden and Susi Snyder, *The Rotterdam Blast: The Immediate Humanitarian Consequences of a 12 Kiloton Nuclear Explosion*, 22, <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/the-rotterdam-blast>. A higher number will be suffering from radiation sickness and blast injuries.
  8. John Ainslie, *If Britain Fired Trident: The Humanitarian Consequences of a Nuclear Attack by a Trident Submarine on Moscow* (Glasgow, 2013), 2, 26–28, <http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ifbritainfiredtrident.pdf>.
  9. John Paul Stevens, “Repeal the Second Amendment,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/opinion/john-paul-stevens-repeal-second-amendment.html>.
  10. H.R.669 and S.200, “Restricting First Use of Nuclear Weapons Act of 2017,” 115th Congress (2017–2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/669> and <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/200>. H.R.669 and S.200, “Restricting First Use of Nuclear Weapons Act of 2019,” 116th Congress (2019–2020), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/669/text> and <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/200>.
  11. Elaine Scarry, “Five Errors in the Reasoning of Alan Dershowitz,” in *Torture: A Collection*, ed. Sanford Levinson (Oxford, 2004), 281–90.
  12. Elaine Scarry, *Who Defended the Country?* (Boston, 2003); Elaine Scarry, *Rule of Law, Misrule of Men* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). Elaine Scarry, “TWA 800 and Electromagnetic Interference,” *New York Review of Books*, April 9, 1998, 59–76; Elaine Scarry, reply by James E. Hall, “An Exchange on TWA 800,” *New York Review of Books*, July 16, 1998, 54–56; Elaine Scarry, “Swissair 111, TWA 800, and Electromagnetic Interference,” *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 2000, 92–100; Elaine Scarry, “The Fall of EgyptAir 990,” *New York Review of Books*, October 5, 2000, 49–53.
  13. Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, 1999); Elaine Scarry, “The Made-Up and the Made-Real,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992): 239–49.
  14. Elaine Scarry, *Naming Thy Name: Cross Talk in Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New York, 2016).
  15. Elaine Scarry, “Beauty and the Scholar’s Duty to Justice,” *Profession* (2000), 21–31.
  16. For a six-minute summary of the conference, see “Presidential First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Is it Legal? Is it Constitutional? Is it Just?,” YouTube, posted February 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lr-bXzvgQBw>.
  17. Grandin Conover, *Ten Years* (Amherst, 1972), 18.