POSTISCRIPT JONATHAN SCHELL

onathan Schell, who died last week, was for many years a central figure both at this magazine and in the intellectual life of the nation. He wrote arguably the most important book of reporting from Vietnam ("The Village of Ben Suc") and the most perceptive reflections on the Watergate scandal ("The Time of Illusion"). But he will be remembered first for his book "The Fate of the Earth." In it, and particularly in the first section, "A Republic of Insects and Grass," he managed to do what no one had accomplished in the first four decades of the nuclear era: bring home the sheer reality of what it would mean to explode our atomic arsenals, summoning up not mainly the visceral, personal fear of the duck-and-cover drill but the far deeper horror of a world permanently sterilized and impoverished. I joined The New Yorker a couple of months after its publication, and canvas mailbags full of letters were still arriving regularly; the Times, in its review, said, "It is tempting to treat Jonathan Schell's achievement as an event of profound historical moment rather than as a book on some publisher's spring list." In a way that's hard to imagine in our fragmented media age, his essay mattered: it played an outsized role in catalyzing the nuclear-freeze movement, which in turn played an outsized role in making nuclear war unthinkable. Before five years were out, Ronald Reagan, with who knows what level of seriousness, was proposing to Mikhail Gorbachev that the weapons be banned altogether.

Some months ago, I phoned Jonathan. By then gravely ill, he'd abandoned work on a book in part about climate change, a subject of great mutual interest. But he hadn't stopped mulling over, with his characteristic penetration, his great topic, which really was the fate of the earth. His thinking struck me as fresh and powerful—as material for a Comment, of which he wrote hundreds over the years, all unsigned. It made me want to see his words in print one more time, and so I made notes as we talked, over a couple of conversations.

He said that, despite arms talks and arsenal reductions, he thought the world had failed to come to grips with the nuclear question. During the Cold War, there was "a weighty reason, if not a sufficient one," for possessing the weapons. "But-and I remember my incredulity-when the Cold War ended, a series of people who'd said Communism was the reason we needed the weapons now had no reaction. It turned out our grip on these things was tighter and our attraction to them was deeper or stranger than the reasons we gave ourselves during the forty-plus years of the Cold War."

The same dynamic was at work with climate change, he told me. Despite ample scientific warning that we were headed for catastrophe, we'd done even less to change course. The fossil-fuel industry's campaign of misinformation



"One of my strengths as an employee is my ability to multitask."

bore some of the responsibility, he said, but beyond that "somehow the public has not grasped the very, very special, unique, weird character of this whole thing." In both the nuclear and the carbon crises, "the jeopardy to our species, and the rest of the species on the earth, adds a dimension that we've never seen before."

Every other loss we've faced, he continued, "is a loss within the framework of life." We know "what it is for an individual to lose his life, or even a whole city. There's a surrounding context in which that loss has meaning. But when it comes to extinction we're left with a kind of blank." We try to fill that blank space by focussing "on particular harms to human beings: Sandy, or Typhoon Haiyan, or these traditional-type disasters." But while these might eventually move us to act, "we intuitively feel that's not the essence of the matter: the essence is more what the religious people say about taking care of creation."

Both crises, he said, "reveal a kind of bankruptcy at the crucial hour of many of the things we place our faith in": institutions like our great universities (he was scornful of the refusal of Harvard, his alma mater, to divest its stock in fossil-fuel companies) or our government itself. "One would have thought liberal constitutional government was designed precisely for this," he saidbut then ever since Watergate he'd tracked our receding faith in Washington. "I always take note when I'm talking to someone at a gas station or somewhere like that. People aren't in denial about climate change, but they sighingly say, 'Isn't it terrible?' And I'm sure it's because they lack faith in the system to change anything."

Bleak as his mood, and his condition, was, he refused despair. "I guess my weak generic all-purpose answer in bad situations is just the raw unpredictability of human affairs," he said. "I can easily imagine that in six months the whole earth will be blazing with anger at what's going on. I can imagine that, but I can't imagine how it will happen." I try to share his hope, but since his book on these questions will now go unwritten and his powerful voice unheard, one possible catalyst has been removed.

-Bill McKibben