Was it a spring day or fall? It was 1999, I believe. I was still rather young, having arrived in Chicago in 1995. She had already had one career, in architecture, and was barreling into another. We agreed to meet in the quad and wandered to an empty bench. The grass was green, the sky clear, the sun warm, and Saba was full of fire, wanting to tell me what she thought about two essays I had recently published. The one was radical, the other not as much, she asserted and wondered why.

It matters little which was which, whether they were or were not as she thought, more or less of this or that. What I thought on that day and throughout the days I knew her was here is someone ferocious in the life of the mind, someone who believes that how we use our minds is a mark of our political commitments and a way of doing politics. Her assumption that I had a horizontal strategy, compressed in her question “why,” made all the difference to how I received her inquiry. Her openness to the possibility that an academic was deploying a strategy, a tactic, a manner of maneuvering a body of work around the always innovative invasions of late liberal governance in our thought and politics, marked her time in the university and made a mark on me that has yet to diminish.

I can’t remember if it was before or after this meeting that Saba joined a group of intellectual friends at the University of Chicago, including Lauren Berlant, Patchen Markell, Candace Vogel, Michael Warner, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and me, in a set of conversations on late liberalism. Saba had just joined the faculty in the Department of Religion as an assistant professor and was finishing the revisions of her groundbreaking book *Politics of Piety*. Among this rapacious group of characters, Saba was fierce and luminous in argument. It matters not whether and when we disagreed—where specifically we broke on how to position or pull an argument in the heavy shadow of liberalism, secularism, imperialism. It matters little when I thought or said, Come on, push farther! Come on, give so-and-so a break! What...
mattered then, as now, was her clear understanding that the life of the mind was a practice of self, not a pathway toward a career.

Saba left for Berkeley in 2004. Those she left behind grieved deeply. And the “betrayal” became clear when she made as deep a mark in a series of interdisciplinary conversations there as she had where we remained. Of course I am kidding. This was no betrayal; it was a portrait of what we loved about her: that she would forge a community of agonistic comrades in arms wherever she landed. We lived in the worlds that she helped make and enrich, and she remained within them all, often shuttling between them, overcoming the entropic exhaustion of each. Her life was a grammatical mood: a “must” more than a “should.” Hers was a bar so high it seemed a constellation writ in the night sky.

I will never forgive the earth that bore her cancer, for it pulled her away from my intimate orbit. I do not know what it is to be a thinker without the thought of Saba on the horizon. I will not think such a thing. I cannot, since Saba was actor and sufferer, someone whose actions are boundless as they continue to cascade. As Arendt wrote, “Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes.”

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Note
1. Arendt, Human Condition, 190.

Work Cited