

ACTS OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

On the most irreversible form of dissent, in art and in real life.

By Doreen St. Félix

January 18, 2026

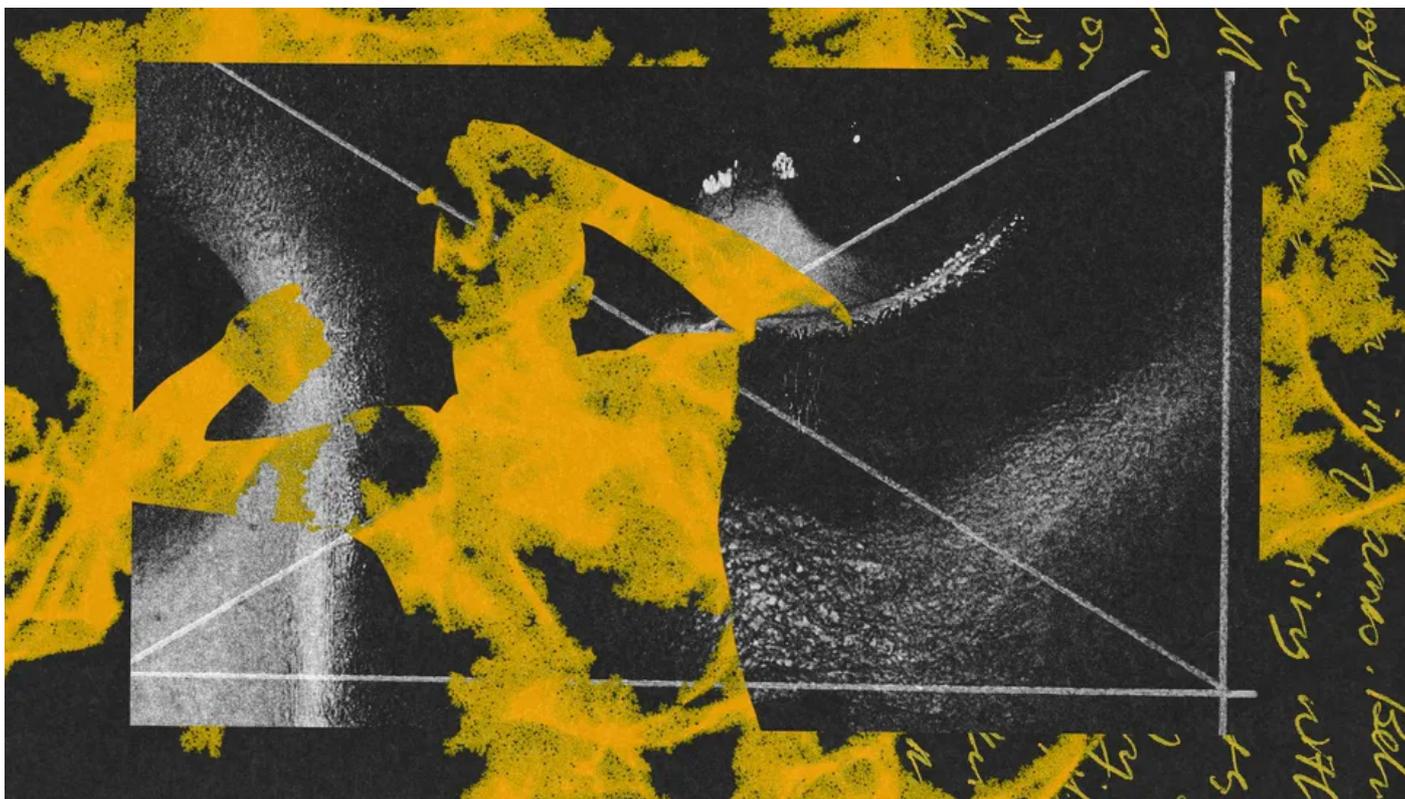


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Memory is a sieve. How many times have I revisited a work I thought I knew well only to find that I had jettisoned certain details, rewritten moods, imagined a different resolution? I recently felt the indignation of

having been thwarted by my own mind following a performance of the most talked-about play in the city this winter, “Bug.”

House lights go down, house lights go up. We’re in a dingy motel room in Oklahoma, the personal abyss of Agnes White (Carrie Coon), a waitress at a local lesbian bar. She is so simpatico with the bed, so slunk on its ugly, generic spread, that we can’t imagine her ever leaving this room—a dank universe of half-hidden crack pipes and wine bottles rendered onto roughly two hundred square feet—and she never will. The immediate sense of Agnes in her cage is that she is prey. But for whom? At the play’s start, the telephone rings. Agnes grabs it off its cradle. No answer. It rings again. No answer. Agnes mouths off into the receiver, puncturing her own somnambulism, as she becomes alert to the possible threat of her stalker ex-husband, Jerry Goss. A kind of apocalyptic deliverance comes to Agnes in the form of another man, a drifter named Peter Evans (Namir Smallwood), who slips into Agnes’s cloistered world and assuages her unease by assuring her that he’s “no axe murderer.”

The playwright, Tracy Letts (now married to Coon), wrote “Bug” in the nineties, but its themes of paranoia, romance, and contagion make us eager to appropriate the play for our present. The interpretation of “Bug” lodged in my memory had been that of the 2006 film adaptation, directed by the great William Friedkin, starring Ashley Judd as Agnes and Michael Shannon as Peter Evans. Shannon’s Peter is jumpy, sensitive, and, very crucially, sexless; he conveys none of the “old” masculine characteristics of savagery or physical dominance that a woman like Agnes would have long ago developed the instincts to detect. He’s a new man burdened by new anxieties. (My colleague Emily Nussbaum, in a recent review of the play, described Letts’s state of mind when he was writing the script: “Letts, who grew up in Oklahoma, was so shocked by Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building that he looked for answers on the then rudimentary web, where he found conspiratorial rabbit holes, freshly dug.”) Smallwood, who is Black, subtly skews the “newness” of Peter; all of a sudden, “Bug” is an interracial love tale, and we become instinctively sympathetic to Peter’s aura of

maladjustment. Peter and Agnes pace around each other in the enclosure, testing intimacy, almost sniffing at each other like small beasts. Histories emerge: Agnes relates to Peter the source of her grief, the disappearance of her young son years prior. Peter, who has a fear of the police that makes Agnes understandably antsy, divulges that he's a veteran of the Gulf War, swiped from the field and made a lab rat by military doctors, who poked and prodded at him relentlessly, causing him to desert.

Friedkin's film sucked much of the humor and twisted romance from the play, I realized, treating it as straight horror. Although I have some issues with the latest interpretation, directed by David Cromer (it veers hokey, and it is missing the feeling of the vertiginous, the fear that we might be at risk of falling into madness, too), the emphasis on the burnished union between Peter and Agnes resonated. Peter and Agnes have sex and go to sleep. A naked Peter wakes up in the night, complaining of a bug bite. He pinches at the sheets, urging Agnes to see the creature responsible, an aphid. And she makes herself see it. The folie-à-deux plot lurches into motion, the aphid spawns thousands more, burrowing under the characters' skin. They claw and claw at each other, creating real rivulets of blood. By the time a man named Dr. Sweet, who may or may not be real, breaches the motel room, the logic of conspiracy has utterly taken over. Agnes's final monologue is a torrent of sense-making, a grieving mother giving herself the answers that years of searching never could. Then, an ending that I'd forgotten, and one that, for the purposes of this column, I'll need to spoil. (Here is your warning.)

Agnes and Peter strip naked and douse themselves with gasoline. Agnes proclaims her love. They light a match.

Immolation registers to us as ancient. Death in the American theatre is generally ruled by the precepts of Chekhov's gun, a more modern invention. Hooked on the explosion at the end of "Bug," I started to see Agnes and Peter as a kind of cultural Adam and Eve, ushering in a world order with their incendiary self-destruction. More pitiable people do not exist;

conspiracy gave Agnes, a bearer of shattering loss, purpose. All of this is probably why I unconsciously chose to forget the ending of the play. It had been Agnes's frightening monologue, her total conversion into Peter's logic of conspiracy as a salve to her numbing grief, that qualified in my mind as the zenith of self-annihilation. My brain had suspended man and woman in the precipitous moment before sacrifice.

We are not actually flooded with cultural examples of self-immolation. The burning men of DeLillo, in "Players" and "Cosmopolis," are fringe gadflies, and the 2018 film "Annihilation," a recent mainstream American text on self-destruction, safely occupies the science-fiction zone. I could not forget the centrality of immolation in "Yr Dead," the flinty and experimental 2024 debut novel by the poet Sam Sax, because immolation is not merely the final expression of despair but the greater organizing principle, the novel's framing vice. "I can feel the accelerant, heaving and sloshing, at the bottom of my bag," our narrator, a twenty-seven-year-old bookseller named Ezra, tells us. The flippancy of the title evokes the internet as Purgatory. It is the Trump era. Ezra is a recognizable figure: a radical in New York showing up to this and that protest. On the morning that they decide to make their way to Trump Tower, where they will set themselves on fire, they see the Biblical portent of a goat; the novel is a kind of nonchronological aria taking place in that moment of protracted dying. In the tradition of the dead or dying narrator, memories—of radical Jewish summer camp, of pained queer awakenings—flood Ezra's narration, as do hallucinations of family history. At times, Ezra invades the consciousness of their parents, their ancestors. The book doesn't grapple with Ezra's reasons for self-immolation, treating it almost as a *fait accompli*. Who could argue with Ezra's disaffection with protest as an engine for revolution, that protest is no longer enough? As Ezra disintegrates, they find themselves "watching people turn my way with expressions on their face that I've never seen before, that I'll never be able to name—not horror or awe, but something far older and strange."

he indelible 1963 photograph of Thich Quang Duc, seated in lotus position i

T And Americans, the supposed inviolable conscience, did set themselves on fire in despair at the Vietnam War. Before dousing herself with cleaning fluid on a Detroit corner in 1965, Alice Herz, then eighty-two, wrote, “I wanted to burn myself like the monks in Vietnam did.” Herz was a peace activist and refugee who had been denied American citizenship after she refused to promise to defend the country by taking up arms. Roughly eight months after Herz’s death, Norman Morrison, a thirty-one-year-old Quaker pacifist, self-immolated at the Pentagon. A week after that, a twenty-two-year-old seminarian, Roger LaPorte, burned in front of the United Nations.

“And now he is dead—dead by his own hand, everyone will say, a suicide,” Dorothy Day wrote in the *Catholic Worker*, following the death of LaPorte, who had been a member of the Catholic Worker Movement. “But after all, there is tradition in the Church of what are called ‘victim souls,’” individuals chosen by God to suffer, to offer up their pain for the salvation of others, very much like Christ himself. Our secular religion of individualism asks us to fear and to pity victim souls as emissaries of a mental illness, to not understand them. In “Bug,” Peter Evans is deluded—a schizophrenic, as Dr. Sweet diagnoses him. But he is not deluded about the fact that the military weaponized his body. By giving himself to fire, he is taking back control.

This gun country is also fire country. The new century has brought about many self-immolations: pastors, lawyers, musicians, incarcerated individuals, and activists have lit themselves on fire toward political ends, and the culture has responded with invocations of mental instability. Before Aaron Bushnell self-immolated outside of the Israeli Embassy in D.C., almost two years ago, he alerted selected press of his intentions. Bushnell, who was twenty-five, was on active duty in the Air Force as a cyber-defense operations specialist; he had won the “Air Force Good Conduct Medal” and the “Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.” Bushnell is reported to have been on the path to reintegration, to shedding military fatigues for plainclothes. But civilian life was intolerable to Bushnell—a moral derangement—who spoke with a

bristling clear-headedness about his “extreme act of protest,” which was “not extreme at all,” he said, speaking to the camera that would capture his death, “compared to what people in Palestine have been experiencing at the hands of their colonizers.” In Erik Baker’s brilliant essay on Bushnell’s action, he situates the protest in two histories: that of political self-immolation but within a foundational “edifice of murder and torture and kidnapping” built by this country. Bushnell’s death, live-streamed on Twitch, is the video-era analogue to the Burning Monk.

The airman is one of four Americans, since 2023, who set themselves on fire in explicit protest of the war in Gaza. (At least one of these protesters survived.) Bushnell’s action is the one that managed to puncture the desensitized American consciousness—because he died on video, because he died in his fatigues. The cool heads in the room, the commentariat, warned against the glorification of Bushnell, framing him as a wayward serviceman whose penchant for extremism had been burnished, in childhood, in a strict and isolated Community of Jesus compound. To recognize the lucidity of Bushnell’s rage would be, so the thinking went, to endorse self-immolation, to be at risk of infection. That Bushnell’s protest did not work, that we managed to tolerate an extraordinary show of anguish as inevitable, swallowing actions that have historically sparked revolutionary connection, is yet another sign of an American pathology. ♦