



# YOUTH WORSHIP

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Her disquiet is a generational disquiet, and it thrums through Harris's recent works.

Henrietta Harris

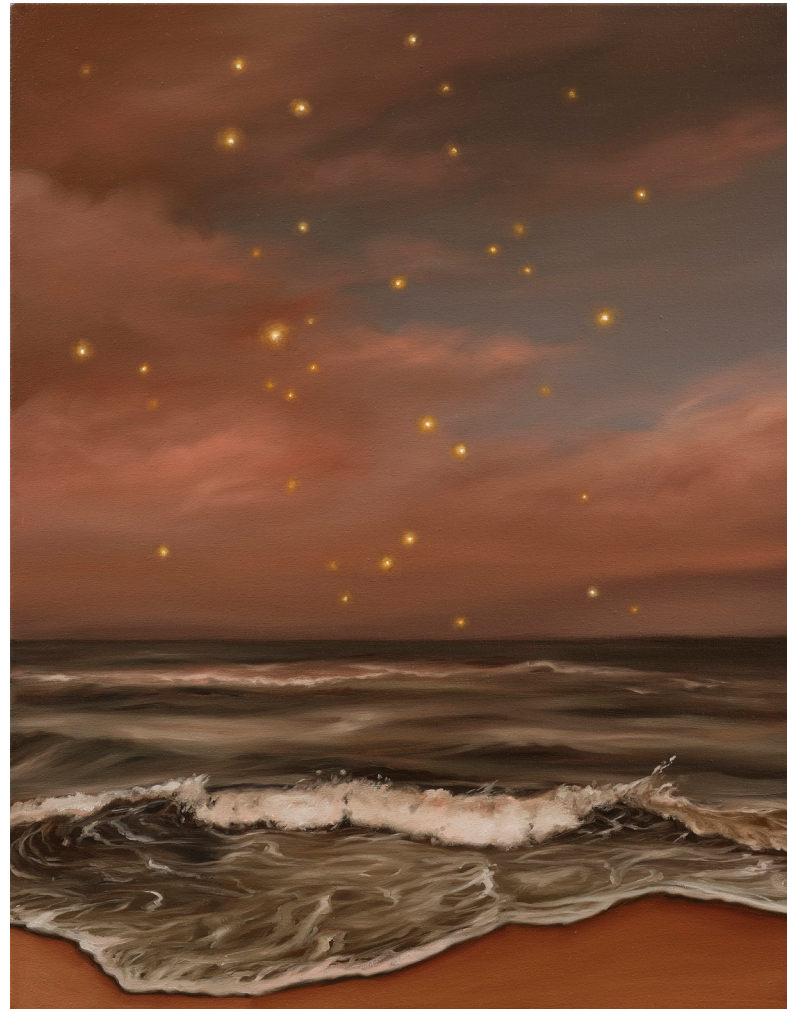
by **Connie Brown**

Henrietta Harris's Instagram might be the most wholesome space on the internet. The comments section is full of pink heart and prayer hand emojis, people tagging their friends saying things like "This is the artist I was telling you about" or "Look, I found her!" and others asking what kind of varnish she uses. These are my favourite of her posts, too, the videos where she pushes the glassy liquid across her canvases, across the jawlines of her subjects, in long, caressing strokes. A glance through her page (and at her follower count) gives an insight into the substantial fanbase Harris has acquired for her works, and the informal avenues and enclaves of the internet through which they have moved. It also tells us something about the faces that Harris is drawn to. Clearly, she is not the only one.

Hers are generational faces: brooding and bookish-looking young people who seem to represent a particular stage of life or emotional state more than they do any individual person. This may owe in part to the distortions Harris practises. Over otherwise conventional oil portraits she'll make pink crayon-like smudges in thick impasto over a finished face (the 'Fixed It' series, 2016–). Others she'll paint multiple times, creating a double-exposure or time-lapse effect, so that the figures appear to mask or ghost themselves. One of her most common gestures mimics a dragging motion, where faces twist sideways or upwards as though they've been exposed to a sudden, cosmic torque, leaving them with melty gashes through their skulls, red and blue filaments flying loose around them like drained blood vessels or party streamers. All of these interventions have the effect of disguising the sitter, while making the experience of internal instability, of varying degrees of intensity, neatly intelligible.

Where her subjects are recognisable—too recognisable to serve as signifiers or proxies for youth at large—they are most often cultural figures who capture the collective feeling of a moment in their own person, people like Lorde and Shaneel Lal. She painted Lal in 2022, the year legislation was passed banning conversion therapy in Aotearoa after a five-year campaign led by the activist. They've since become a leading voice on LGBTQ+ issues and a figurehead for a new wave of politically conscious queer youth reviving the old call for liberation proper. Their portrait is unusually trenchant for Harris and free from any of her visual tricks, with focus drawn instead to Lal's swan neck, high cheekbones and firm gaze. Lorde she painted in 2021, fresh off the release of *Solar Power* and suitably haloed by yellow light against a pink-cloud background. "Born in the year of OxyContin," that album begins, becoming an instant touchstone for the narco-generation of the late 1990s and early 2000s—those kids raised on dreamscapes and dopamine only to emerge into adulthood during a global pandemic.

Susan Sontag characterised youth as a metaphor "for energy, restless mobility, appetite: for the state of 'wanting.'"<sup>101</sup> Harris's portraits might be said to articulate what this feels like: it's spinning around on an empty stomach, on unsteady, halting footing in the world. For a long time, that world tended toward emptiness, either as a backdrop of solid colour or a hailstorm of gold-leaf confetti, enhancing the atmosphere of



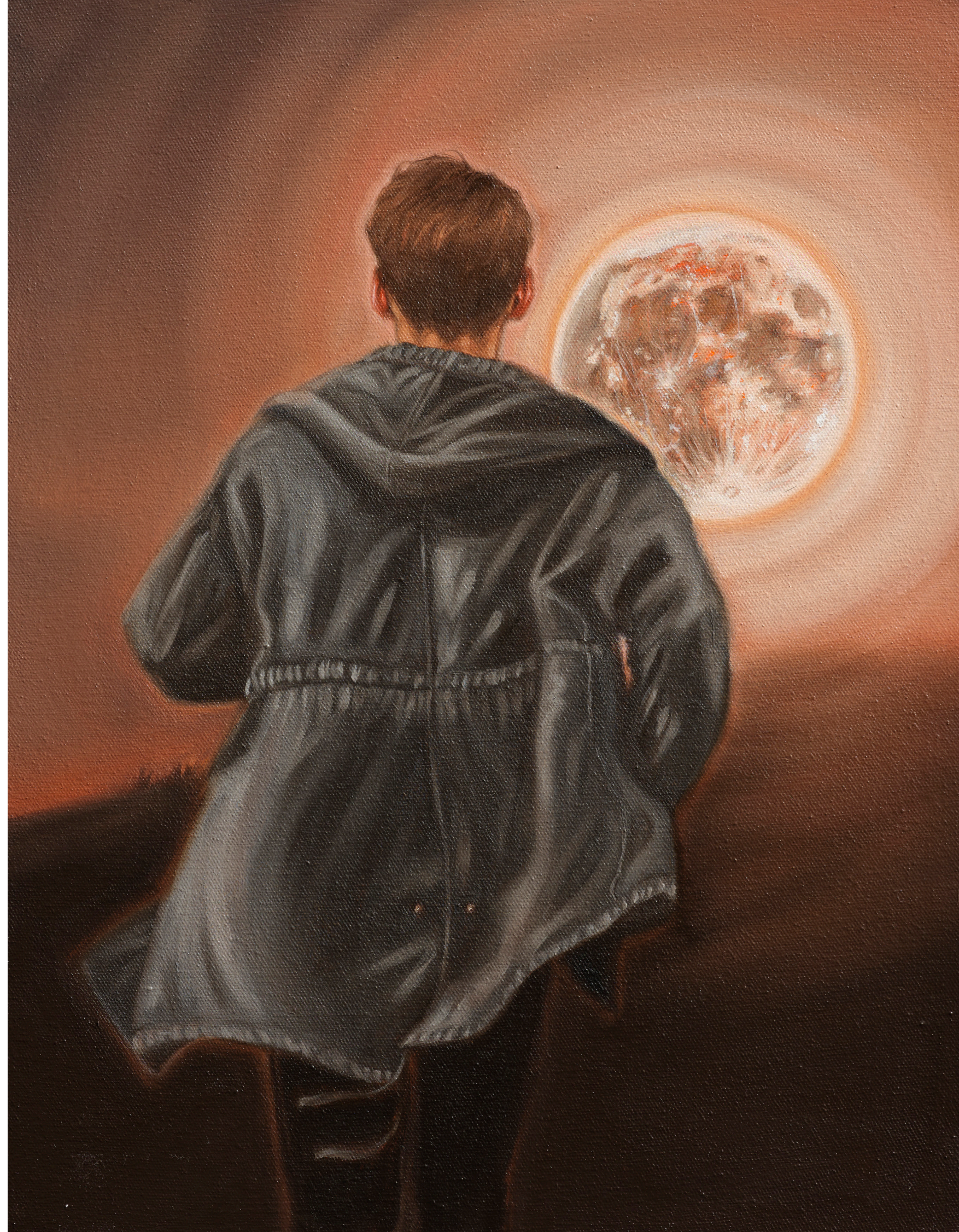
Henrietta Harris, *Enemies Don't Say Hello*, 2023, oil on canvas, 46 × 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

OPPOSITE  
Henrietta Harris, *In Too Deep*, 2023, oil on canvas, 46 × 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

solitude and enchantment surrounding the subjects. But landscapes have become steadily more prominent in her work over the past few years, with her latest exhibition, *Dipped in Time*, at Melanie Roger Gallery, featuring several astrological and landscape scenes alongside four portraits. Three of these portraits practise a new, more gentle distortion, the skin turned translucent so that sunset skies and full moons appear across the subjects' faces, mingling with their freckles, as if they were caught in the beam of a projector in a planetarium. In these works, Harris's desire to loosen the boundary between self and environment is evident, and unsettling to the introspection that has been the overarching subject of her portraiture. Less and less do her figures occupy a vacant space, their charged inner worlds eclipsing all alterity. More and more do these inner worlds feel porous, even vulnerable, to the purpling skies and frothy tidal zones in which Harris places them or paints them in tandem with.

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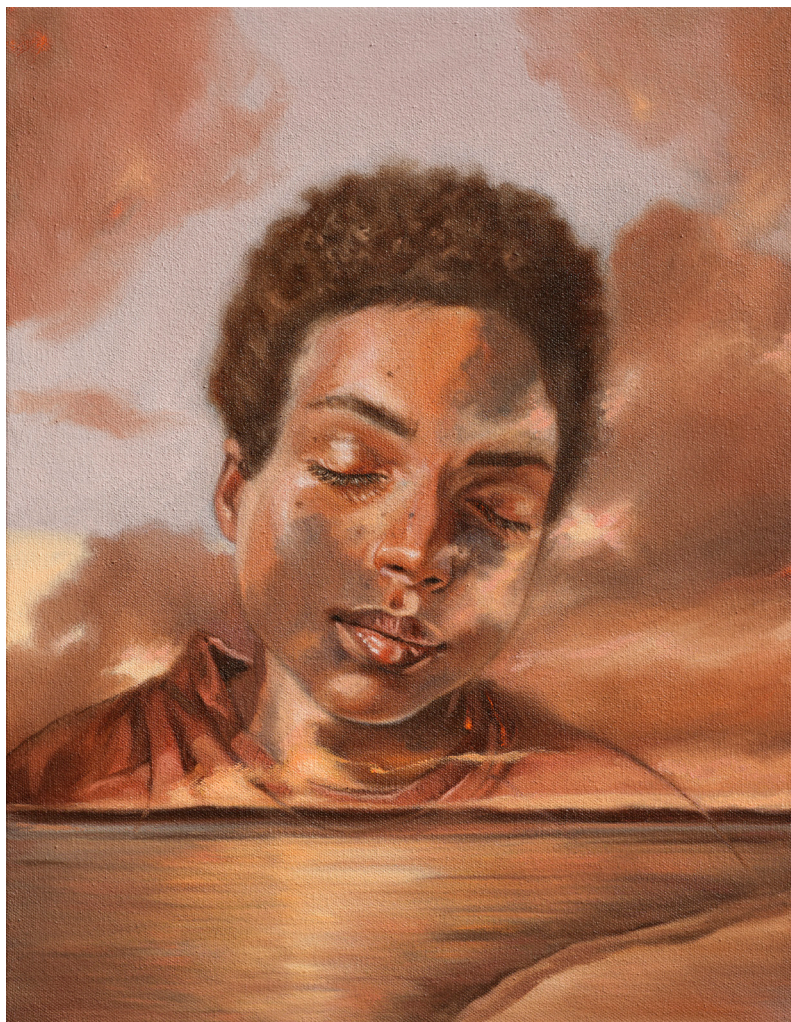
There's a moment in Greta Thunberg's 2019 speech to the UN Climate Action Summit when the young activist seems to be abruptly beset by a sense of disorientation: "This is all wrong," she says to the bureaucrats gathered in the room to hear her speak, "I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school, on the other side of the ocean." It is a moment that makes clear the radically changed stakes of youth





Henrietta Harris's studio.  
Photo: Scott Hardy





today, and the sources and tenor of uncertainty for a generation grown up with an increasingly imperilled planet. Although climate change is by no means the first instance of global disaster affecting adolescents' sense of security, it makes unique demands of young people to bear the image of a hopeful future. The energy, restless mobility and appetites of young people, these, too, are subject to the dominant extractive logic of our era, and this is what overcomes Thunberg during her speech, a sense of being thrust out of adolescence and into intergovernmental panel discussions where adults purr at her outrage. "You have stolen my dreams," she shouts, "How dare you!"

Thunberg's is a generational face. Her disquiet is a generational disquiet, and it thrums through Harris's recent works. Harris's strength has always been her sensitivity to the lives of young people, and these new paintings show her pushing to understand the complex existential pressures of the moment and their impact on still-forming identity. Neither portrait nor landscape painting feels especially well primed for this task. Each comes weighted with conventions that have been developed precisely in service of human exceptionalism, either through the human image, or its latent presence as a 'frame on the land', in art historian Francis Pound's famous formulation. But by pairing and in some cases merging the two genres, Harris uproots their emotive centres. Feeling interpenetrates her human and environmental subjects. One effect of this is the impression of deep

interconnection, and another is heightened ambiguity. *In Too Deep* (2023) shows a figure with their back turned on the viewer, no distortions or illusions this time, parka flung out behind them as they run toward a pulsing blood moon at the top of the hill. Is this a scene of flight or rapture? There's a hint of a Brontë character, tormentedly crossing a heath or moor. There's another of the half-drunk-first-love dash toward the view. As attuned as she is to fears of and for nature, Harris also always affirms the enduring beauty of what she paints. The dark, blush tones that suffuse all fourteen pieces, and the green-tinged stars, streaking comets, blood moons and flickering Joker-smiles of pink lightning that appear across them, *could* herald an apocalyptic solar event, or, simply—spectacularly—the final passage of the day.

"How do we conceptualize the aftermath? ... How do we represent the radical potentiality of the not-yet?"<sup>02</sup> T. J. Demos poses these questions in his book *Beyond the World's End*, contending that art concerned with present environmental conditions must take stock simultaneously of loss and possibility. Though the works of *Dipped in Time* may feel more gentle than radical, they do manage this dual view, and they do rally strongly against denial, if denial is the willed ignorance of externality and, in regard to climate change specifically, of mutual dependency. Denial could be added to Rebecca Solnit's list of hope's "opposites and opponents," which also includes despair, defeatism, cynicism and pessimism. "What all these enemies of hope have in common," she writes, "is confidence about what is going to happen."<sup>03</sup> While Harris has no such confidence, she has an impressive wellspring of sensitivity for what it feels like to face down uncertainty. The floating kid-oracles of *Dipped in Time*, *Wavy Baby* and *Find Out* (all 2023) might visit bearing no prophecies or quick fixes, but they have had restored to them their right to dream, and, in Harris's paintings, they dream by the lungful.

- Henrietta Harris  
*Dipped in Time*  
5–28 March 2024  
Melanie Roger Gallery  
Tamaki Makaurau

Henrietta Harris, *Find Out*, 2023, oil on canvas, 46 x 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

OPPOSITE  
Henrietta Harris, *Disguise*, 2023, oil on canvas, 46 x 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

- 01 Susan Sontag, 'The Double Standard of Ageing,' *The Saturday Review*, 23 September 1972, 31.
- 02 T. J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End: Arts of Living at the Crossing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.
- 03 Rebecca Solnit, 'Why Climate Despair Is a Luxury,' *The New Statesman*, 17 July 2023.

