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FEBRUARY 21, 2011
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EGYPT IN REVOLT
JONATHAN SCHELL • LAILA LALAMI • KAI BIRD

THE UK’S LEFT-WING TEA PARTY
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THE MOST FEMINIST PLACE IN THE WORLD
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Letters

WikiLetters: Pollitt on Assange

Susanville, Calif.
I was delighted with Katha Pollitt’s “The Case of Julian Assange” [“Subject to Debate,” Jan. 10/17]. She dared to challenge the consensus view of the left media, namely, that because Assange leaked information that the public has a right to know, he must also be innocent of rape. Pollitt not only decisively proved her point, she also shook her finger at fellow progressives, including Nation columnist Alexander Cockburn. She has renewed my faith in The Nation’s editorial policy.

Candace Toft

Maple Glen, Pa.
Being attacked by Katha Pollitt is an honor, but she misrepresents me and the points I made regarding the dubious sex charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Pollitt accuses me of making light of rape in my article—specifically of the Swedish charges against Assange. Pollitt accuses me of making light of rape in my article—specifically of the Swedish charges against Assange. In fact, as I wrote, I take the charge of rape, including date rape, very seriously, but Sweden isn’t charging Assange with rape.

Pollitt repeatedly makes the journalistically inexcusable error of talking about Assange as if he is guilty, as when she says, “It’s been known for some time that Assange was accused of using his body weight to force sex on one woman.” That’s pretty slippery wording—not saying it’s “known” that he did such a thing, just that it’s “known” that he’s been accused of it. But Pollitt goes on to say he penetrated a second woman without a condom yet while she was asleep, conveying the clear impression that it is a fact. It is not a fact; it is an allegation by the alleged victim.

Furthermore, this woman said the alleged (a word Pollitt doesn’t seem to like using) act happened not while she was asleep but while she was “half-asleep.” Initiating intercourse with a sleeping woman might be offensive and perhaps criminal. But what the hell does “half-asleep” mean? Could a guy know whether she’s hearing yes or no? What if Assange was “half-asleep” too? Is anyone culpable? Remember, this is two adults in bed who had already had consensual sex, making it all the more likely that Assange might have misunderstood his “half-asleep” partner’s level of enthusiasm.

As for “sex by surprise” (not my terminology), which referred to the other alleged victim’s claims that Assange deliberately sabotaged a condom and continued having sex after it “broke”: on what basis does she know he deliberately damaged it, and how would she know he knew it broke? These are two pretty sorry cases of “rape.” In fact, the leader of Women Against Rape, a British feminist organization, ridicules the charges (I quoted her). I also made the point, ignored by Pollitt, that my investigation of Interpol’s records showed Sweden had sought only two Interpol red alerts for detention of people on sex charges in all of 2010. One was a Swedish national facing multiple charges of child sex. The other was Assange, wanted only for questioning on the two women’s complaints. Calling in Interpol was a remarkable case of overkill and raises questions of political motivation, particularly given the US government’s venomous antipathy toward Assange.

Furthermore, a female municipal prosecutor initially dropped the case after discovering that both women had tweeted friends after having sex with Assange to brag about their conquests. The case was reopened by a national-level prosecutor under suspicious political conditions, a point Pollitt ignores.

Pollitt can attack me but should at least meet basic journalistic standards. Assange, never before accused of a sex crime, is innocent of these accusations, which are of a “he said, she said” nature, unlikely ever to go to trial or lead to a guilty verdict.

Dave Lindorff

Pollitt Replies

New York City
One of the Swedish charges against Assange is indeed rape: the penetration (without a condom yet) of a sleeping woman. That would be rape under US
The Revolutionary Moment

If the world has a heart, it beats now for Egypt. Not, of course, the Egypt of President Hosni Mubarak—with the rigged elections, the censored press, the axed Internet, the black-clad security police and the tanks and the torture chambers—but the Egypt of the intrepid ordinary citizens who, almost entirely unarmed, with little more than their physical presence in the streets and their prayers, in the name of justice and freedom, are defying this whole apparatus of intimidation and violence. Their courage and sacrifice have given new life to the spirit of the nonviolent democratic resistance to dictatorship symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. That event in fact symbolized a longer wave of revolutions that, spreading like a brush fire, swept dozens of dictators out of power, from Spain in the mid-’70s to Poland in the ’80s, to the “color revolutions” of the early twenty-first century. But that global contagion seemed to be flagging recently. Now dictators all over the world are on their guard again. In Saudi Arabia the monarchy is looking over its shoulder. Yemen is on notice. In China the word “Egypt” has been censored on the Internet: the Egyptian autocrats removed the Internet from Egypt; the Chinese autocrats removed Egypt from the Internet.

Egypt presents in full the unfathomable and perhaps unfathomable mystery of revolution. For decades, the structure of an oppressive state rises above society, murderous, imperturbable, implacable. The torture chambers are operating twenty-four hours a day. The nation’s wealth flows to secret accounts abroad. The rich and privileged sit contented in wealth flows to secret accounts abroad. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sigh/Runs in blood down their gated communities. “And 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their gated communities. “And the hapless Soldier’s sight/Runs in blood down Palace walls” (Blake). Often the sovereign bows to a foreign paymaster. A fog of propaganda fills the air like poison gas. The Leader’s portrait covers office buildings. Unaccountable bureaucracy tangles up the country in a thousand absurd regulations. Leonid Brezhnev snores in the Kremlin, his “dead hand” hovering over the nuclear button. Imelda Marcos communes with her 3,000 pairs of shoes in her colossal shoe closet. Ben Ali sips cocktails in his resort in Hammamet. Nothing, it seems, will ever change, can ever change. In the words of Nadezhda Mandelstam regarding Stalin’s rule, “There was a special form of the sickness—lethargy, plague, hypnotic trance or whatever one calls it, that affected all those who committed terrible deeds. All the murderers, provocateurs and informers had one feature in common: it never occurred to them that their victims might one day rise up again and speak.” Only a few “dissident” voices break the calm, and most of them are in jail or in exile.

But then suddenly a tremor runs through the entire edifice. A few thousand people come out in the street, then tens of thousands, then, appearing as if by magic, hundreds of thousands all around the country. And somehow this rebellion—breaking out in only a few days—can be enough. Its spirit touches a nerve in something like the whole nation, which awakes, and with amazing ease sheds the long-hated yet tolerated regime. (In nearby Tunisia, the fuse that set off the Egyptian bomb, it took only twenty-three days from the beginning of the uprising for Ben Ali to get on his plane to Saudi Arabia.) Suddenly, all the rules change, all the old relationships of command and subservience are reversed, and the structures of power begin to dissolve. Later, scholars will ferret out signs of what was to come and even find “causes” of the revolt, but the fact is that revolutions are the least anticipated of all
The foundation of a new order of things is of course a notoriously difficult business. Everyone knows the course of revolution is zigzag, and that the final outcome may be unwelcome. Power is disintegrating. It is in the streets. Someone will pick it up. A new government of the United States? It has been behind the curve. Inveighing against “violence on all sides,” it at first failed to choose between the people and their oppressor. The Obama administration exhibited its overall signature flaw in caricature: it is embedded with (let’s say this straight: in bed with) the powers that be. Well meaning, it begins by taking those powers—the commanding heights of the society—as given, immovable. Then it starts to bargain. (On healthcare it bargains with Big Pharma, on finance with Wall Street, on war with the top generals—above all, David Petraeus.) Then, when the administration is duly handed its half- or quarter-loaf—the stripped-down healthcare plan, the eviscerated financial regulations, the soft date for withdrawal from Afghanistan bought with the surge in troop levels—it’s at the charity of these powers still, we know a few things about what happens at such moments. A people long overawed by state violence throws off fear, and in a flash begins to act courageously. Courage becomes as contagious as the fear once was, and millions suddenly practice disobedience and defiance. At that moment, the dictator’s writ runs no longer, and the plane to Saudi Arabia beckons. In Hannah Arendt’s words, “The situation changes abruptly. Not only is the rebellion not put down but the arms themselves change hands—sometimes, as in the Hungarian revolution, within a few hours…. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolution reveals in a flash how civil obedience—to laws, to rulers, to institutions—is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.”

By January, Egypt had clearly arrived at this moment. It’s commonplace now to say that everything depends on whether the army will intervene. And that is certainly true in part. Very often the hour of death for a dictatorship is the hour when the military, caught up in the mood sweeping the rest of the country, refuses to follow orders or defects to the other side. That’s why it’s so significant that on many occasions already in Egypt, crowds, chanting “peacefully, peacefully” have embraced soldiers, who then have let them climb up on the tanks in public squares, giving the V sign. “The people, the army: one hand,” the demonstrators chanted hopefully. The army responded with a declaration that “the armed forces will not resort to use of force against our great people.”

And the government of the United States? It has been behind the curve. Inveighing against “violence on all sides,” it at first failed to choose between the people and their oppressor. The Obama administration exhibited its overall signature flaw in caricature: it is embedded with (let’s say this straight: in bed with) the powers that be. Well meaning, it begins by taking those powers—the commanding heights of the society—as given, immovable. Then it starts to bargain. (On healthcare it bargains with Big Pharma, on finance with Wall Street, on war with the top generals—above all, David Petraeus.) Then, when the administration is duly handed its half- or quarter-loaf—the stripped-down healthcare plan, the eviscerated financial regulations, the soft date for withdrawal from Afghanistan bought with the surge in troop levels—it’s at the charity of these powers still, we know a few things about what happens at such moments. A people long overawed by state violence throws off fear, and in a flash begins to act courageously. Courage becomes as contagious as the fear once was, and millions suddenly practice disobedience and defiance. At that moment, the dictator’s writ runs no longer, and the plane to Saudi Arabia beckons. In Hannah Arendt’s words, “The situation changes abruptly. Not only is the rebellion not put down but the arms themselves change hands—sometimes, as in the Hungarian revolution, within a few hours…. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolution reveals in a flash how civil obedience—to laws, to rulers, to institutions—is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.”

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NEOCONS ATTACK EL BARADEI:
Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has emerged as a leading figure in the Egyptian pro-democracy movement and a credible alternative to President Hosni Mubarak. ElBaradei’s newfound prominence has angered pro-Mubarak neoconservatives, such as Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, who recently called him “a stooge of Iran.” Former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer and former UN Ambassador John Bolton have added their voices to the anti-ElBaradei neocon caucus.

It’s not surprising that the same people who were so wrong about Iraq’s nonexistent WMDs are once again trying to undermine ElBaradei, who opposed the invasion of Iraq, warning that there was “no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities in Iraq.” In return, the Bush administration tapped his phone and tried to prevent him from leading a third term at the IAEA. Nonetheless, ElBaradei was unanimously re-elected as IAEA chief and awarded the Nobel in 2005 for his arms control work.

Soon after, the neocons began attacking ElBaradei over Iran. Why? Because he has refused to endorse a US- or Israeli-led attack on Iran, much to the chagrin of war cheerleaders like Bolton. The former IAEA chief has criticized the Iranian government for evading weapons inspections, but he’s advocated a diplomatic solution to the nuclear standoff. In a 2007 profile, the New York Times called ElBaradei “an indispensable irritant to Iran and its foes.”

His clashes with Tehran and Washington will likely serve him well in Cairo as he navigates the murky landscape of the current Egyptian regime. He has been highly critical of Arab autocrats and the Western governments that prop them up. If ElBaradei continues to annoy neocons in Washington, it means he’s probably doing something right.

ARI BERMAN

JUDICIAL ACTIVISM ON STEROIDS:
With a bow to the Tea Party movement, a federal judge appointed by Ronald Reagan determined on January 31 that healthcare reform—at least as imagined by the Obama administration—is unconstitutional. In a seventy-eight-page opinion laced with references to the Boston Tea Party and the skewed takes on history and the Constitution favored by the Tea Partisans, Florida District Judge Roger Vinson accepted arguments advanced by conservative attorneys general against the Affordable Care Act, which was enacted last year.

Vinson’s objection was to the individual mandate, which will require Americans to obtain health insurance as a part of a broad plan to spread risk and reduce the costs. The mandate has drawn complaints from conservatives who don’t want the government getting in the way of insurance-industry profiteering, as well as from progressives who object to requiring Americans to buy insurance from the profiteers. But Vinson didn’t just reject the mandate; he took a wild leap and ruled, “Because the individual mandate is unconstitutional, and not severable, the entire Act must be declared void.”

So a government that can require citizens to pay taxes and fight wars cannot require them to obtain health insurance coverage? That makes scant sense to legal scholars and healthcare analysts; Health Care for America Now’s Ethan Rome calls the ruling “judicial activism on steroids.”

But Vinson’s embrace of Tea Party “logic” could find takers among conservative judicial activists on the Supreme Court, which is all but certain to be called upon to sort out conflicting rulings by various jurists. What if the High Court rejects what conservatives call “Obamacare”? Judge Vinson noted that Congress has the power to address the problems and inequities in our health care system. Medicare and Medicaid, both single-payer systems, have been determined to be constitutional. Doctors active with Physicians for a National Health Program are arguing that rather than defend the mandate, legislators should expand and improve those popular programs to provide “Medicare for All.”

JOHN NICHOLS

KEITH ELLISON, D-DEMOCRACY: While President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Congressional leaders were agonizingly cautious in their responses to the democracy protests that swept Egypt, Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison knew which side he was on. The first Muslim elected to Congress and a well-recognized player on the international stage (often at the behest of the State Department) was issuing statements, rallying Americans to speak up and constantly sending tweets: “Ppl of Egypt DESERVE freedom; I stand w/ them.” When Egyptian authorities detained ElBaradei, Ellison’s response was, “Let’s DO something.” He organized a letter drive to get the White House to pressure President Mubarak to back off. Ellison’s pro-democracy idealism was mixed with a knowing pragmatism; a savvy internationalist, he argued that the United States must get ahead of the democracy wave: “We’re always on the side of ‘stability’ rather than justice. So let’s get on the right side this time.”

JOHN NICHOLS

ABORTION UNDER FIRE: In a stunning attack on reproductive rights, Republican Congressman Christopher Smith of New Jersey has introduced the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act (HR 3). The bill, which has 173 co-sponsors, mostly Republicans, seeks to expand the Hyde Amendment, which limits federal funding for abortion to cases of rape, incest and life endangerment. HR 3 would further limit the rape exemption to “forcible rape,” redefining who is considered a rape survivor in the eyes of the law. The bill would also impose a tax penalty on people and small businesses that choose insurance plans that cover abortion. “This amounts to an abortion tax, with a goal of stopping private insurance plans from providing coverage of abortion,” says Stephanie Sterling of the National Women’s Law Center.

House Speaker John Boehner has called the bill one of Congress’s top priorities. “These are the same politicians who campaigned on jobs and the economy,” says Nancy Keenan, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America. “Evidently, House leaders have made attacks on women’s access to reproductive healthcare and the redefinition of rape their new jobs agenda.”

KATE MURPHY
states rising out of revolution is a long one. But nothing so far in the conduct of the Egyptians in the streets compels us to foresee such a turn of events. For now we must express solidarity.

For the time of decision approaches. At this writing, two great armies, the Egyptian people and Egyptian army, coexist uneasily in the country’s streets and squares. Pro-Mubarak goons have been sent out to attack the demonstrators. “1989” can also mean the massacre of the freedom activists in Tiananmen Square in China. Or, as we must hope and believe, the spirit of the people may at last penetrate the innermost citadels of power, which will abdicate, ushering in a new and better order.  

Jonathan Schell

Winter of Discontent

For those of us who have grown up in a dictatorship, the protests that have ignited throughout the Arab world feel like the fulfillment of a great promise. This promise was made to our parents and grandparents, to all those who fought for independence: that we would have the right to decide our future. Instead, our leaders delivered us into a world of silence and fear and told us that we must watch what we say and what we do. Our institutions were undermined or dismantled, our political parties stilled or co-opted, their members disappeared or neutralized. And whenever we looked to the West for help, its presidents and prime ministers spoke with forked tongues, one side lecturing us and fear and told us that we must watch what we say and what we do. Our institutions were undermined or dismantled, our political parties stilled or co-opted, their members disappeared or neutralized. And whenever we looked to the West for help, its presidents and prime ministers spoke with forked tongues, one side lecturing us

COMMENT

The young man who started this winter of discontent was Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit vendor in Tunisia. He could afford neither the required cart license nor the bribes the police demanded whenever they saw him, so in his despair he set himself on fire in front of the government office in Sidi Bouzid. Is it any wonder that unemployed college graduates took to the streets, or that professionals and trade unions joined the protests? After all, Bouazizi was not part of any political party, he was not brandishing a sign, he was not even asking for democratic reforms; he was simply trying to make a living. And if he could end up like this, so could all of them. Tunisia was full of Mohamed Bouazizis.

As it turned out, the entire Arab world was full of Mohamed Bouazizis. In Egypt, his name was Khaled Said, and he was a 28-year-old businessman. Last June, Said was in a cybercafé in Alexandria when the police demanded everyone’s papers. He asked the officers why, and soon after he lay dead, his face smashed against the staircase of a nearby building, his cries for help unanswered because any attempt to meddle in a police matter routinely results in arrest and torture. Over the following weeks, young Egyptians staged protests demanding justice for this man, protests that were repressed by President Mubarak’s police thugs.

But the Tunisians’ ouster of President Ben Ali galvanized the Egyptian youth, whose uprising on January 25 was the release, at long last, of the fear and silence that had been bottled up for so long. Year after year, they had heard American presidents deliver hypocritical lectures on democracy while giving $1.3 billion in military aid to Mubarak, their torturer in chief. The tear-gas canisters, the guns and bullets, the communication systems and police trucks—all the tools of repression that young Egyptians face—were quite likely bought with American aid. After three decades of empty promises, the young people realized that Mubarak was not going to reform, that what happened to Khaled Said could happen to each one of them, and that the time for change had finally come.

In their struggle for self-determination, the people of Egypt undoubtedly know they have the support of other Arab citizens. But they also know that the Obama administration is watching these events with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. In an interview with PBS, the vice president called Mubarak an “ally” and refused to characterize him as a “dictator.” And the president said that the United States “will continue to stand up for the rights of the Egyptian people” while also being “committed to working with [Egypt’s] government.” What Obama failed to acknowledge was that these two sides were no longer bridgeable and, of the two, it was the regime that had to go.

For the moment, it seems that Obama has chosen to side with the regime. The sudden appointment of former intelligence head Omar Suleiman as vice president and of air force chief Ahmed Shafik as prime minister looks like a behind-the-scenes compromise to replace Mubarak with Mubarak Lite. This “new” regime would probably continue to participate in rendition programs, maintain the siege on Gaza and generally do what is expected of an “ally” who is also not a “dictator.” In order to get support for these two men, some politicians and pundits are pushing a narrative that, without Mubarak or Mubarak Lite, Egypt will be run by a band of religious fanatics who might threaten the Camp David Accords and start a regional conflict. CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, for instance, bluntly asked one of his guests whether Al Qaeda might exploit the Egyptian uprising.

But it is useful to remember that Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is the product of the most pro-American regime the Arab world has ever known—that of Anwar el-Sadat. A pro-American dictator is not a guarantee of protection from extremism; more often than not, his tyranny creates the very extremism that he was supposed to stop. It is also important to remember that the uprising in Egypt is led by broad secular forces; the Muslim Brotherhood did not instigate these protests, nor did the smaller opposition groups. The people who are tearing down the pictures of Mubarak want real change. So
the Obama administration must decide whether it is willing to work with a new generation of independent-minded Arabs or whether it will cede this role to other world powers. But either way, it must accept, once and for all, that the future of Egypt is in the hands of the Egyptian people.

Laila Lalami, the author of Secret Son, is an associate professor at the University of California, Riverside.

America’s ‘Shah’ in Egypt

How did a bland, uncharismatic army general like Hosni Mubarak manage to stay in power for three decades? I think that what we are witnessing in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria is the final unraveling of the military autocracy created by Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. Unlike Mubarak, Nasser was a genuinely populist army colonel who fired the imaginations of a generation of postwar Arabs with his vision of a modernizing, progressive nationalism. Nasser persuaded Egyptians that they were part of one Arabic-speaking nation. This Pan-Arab nationalist vision had wide appeal in the early postcolonial era. But it was Nasser’s avowedly secular stance that seemed to hold the promise of Arab modernity.

Suave and articulate, Nasser had read a great many books in English, including works by Dickens, Carlyle and Gandhi, and biographies of famous world leaders. He was a secular, modern Arab who had an abiding admiration for American films and magazines. He came to power in an army coup in 1952 but was elected to the presidency in 1956 with a popular mandate. He gradually became a dictator. He had a deep distrust of both the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the years, his closest political enemies became the Brothers. He threw tens of thousands of them in jail because he could not tolerate their religious xenophobia. He believed that those Arabs who mixed Islam with politics stood in the way of progress.

But then the cause of a secular Arab modernity was shockingly defeated during the June 1967 war, a war Nasser had stumbled into and was not prepared for. It was a debacle for the Arab world. But at the time few understood that it would also be a calamity for the West and Israel—precisely because it discredited secularism and opened the door to Islamists. Young Arab men like Egypt’s Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri later wrote that the naksa—the June “setback”—“influenced the awakening of the jihadist movement.”

Nasser remained in power, but he was disheartened and embittered. He blamed America for his defeat and suspected that the CIA had been plotting to unseat him. This was true. Washington’s foreign policy establishment had always viewed Nasser’s nationalism as inimical to US interests, and the CIA had funneled millions of dollars to his Muslim Brotherhood enemies.

When he died of a massive heart attack on September 28, 1970, millions of Egyptians poured into the streets of Cairo weeping and crying out his name, “Gamal! Gamal!” Sherrif Hatatta, an Egyptian doctor and novelist once imprisoned by Nasser, later remarked, “Nasser’s greatest achievement was his funeral. The world will never again see 5 million people crying together.” Nasser was the last Arab leader who could plausibly claim to reflect the broad popular will. He was not a democrat but neither was he a tyrant. Personally, he was incorruptible. He died with a modest bank account. With him died the dream of secular Arab nationalism. His ideas were defeated by a confluence of forces—best described by Syrian philosopher Sadik al-Azm as those “values of ignorance, myth-making, backwardness, dependency and fatalism.” But Americans would be remiss to deny our contributions to his defeat. Our government worked hard to ensure that Nasser would fail. The irony is that decades after his death the vacuum is being filled in part by the Muslim Brotherhood—whose theocratic, antimodernist ideas Nasser had tried to repress.

Nasser’s successor, Anwar el-Sadat, initially had little in the way of a popular mandate. Early in his tenure he pandered to the religious right wing. After the October 1973 war, Sadat briefly acquired a measure of popularity—but he ruled as a dictator. He demonstrated great political courage in November 1977 when he flew to Jerusalem and addressed the Israeli Knesset. And the Camp David Accords he signed in 1978 with Prime Minister Menachem Begin might have opened the door to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement. But Israel continued to build settlements in the occupied territories and came to no peace agreement with its Palestinian, Lebanese or Syrian neighbors.

Sadat was assassinated on October 6, 1981—at which point his vice president, Gen. Hosni Mubarak, succeeded him. Mubarak was then a nonentity. It soon became apparent that he was simply an apparatchik of the Egyptian military establishment. He never attempted to create for himself the kind of popular legitimacy that came naturally to Nasser. His one talent was that of a Machiavellian survivor. He marshaled all the usual tools of repression—and more than $60 billion of American aid stemming from the Camp David Accords—to sustain his power. He was America’s “shah”—and that has also been his undoing. Washington blindly regarded him as a voice for “moderation” when his own long-suffering people saw him as a plain old-fashioned dictator. But for thirty years he sustained the Camp David regime—which gave Israel only a cold peace on its Egyptian border.

Now his seemingly impregnable reign is crumbling. His pathetic offer not to run for re-election was greeted with jeers. The Egyptian people seem virtually united in their demand for his immediate departure, even as Mubarak’s paid thugs desperately try to turn Tahrir Square into another Tiananmen.

The strategic consequences for America and Israel are momentous. Any post-Mubarak regime, for instance, will not have itself seen as complicit in the Israeli blockade of Gaza. This does not mean that a post-Mubarak popular government will seek a war with Israel. There is no constituency for war. But any new Egyptian government will insist that the promises President Carter extracted from Israel at Camp David in 1978 be realized. That means Israel will face additional pressures to end the occupation and negotiate the formation of a Palestinian state based largely on its 1967 borders.

Nasser’s dismal dictatorial political descendants are finally exiting. We can hope that what percolates up from the Arab
street in Cairo (and maybe Tunis, Amman and Damascus) will reflect a younger generation’s aspirations for a semblance of democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood is certainly the single largest organized opposition force today—but it may turn out that it will be forced to share power with Egyptians nostalgic for Nasser’s secular legacy.

KAI BIRD

Kai Bird is a Pulitzer Prize–winning historian and a contributing editor of The Nation. This essay is adapted from his recent memoir, Crossing Mandelbaum Gate: Coming of Age Between the Arabs and Israelis, a finalist for the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Needles in a Haystack

The Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission is better than its reviews but still very disappointing. Its 545-page report represents a powerful, fact-filled indictment of the financial system and the leading players and institutions that produced the national catastrophe. But there is one glaring omission—the massive fraud that occurred on Wall Street.

Some leading economists and former regulators (not to mention citizens at large) think fraud is a central explanation for what went wrong. The commission’s conclusions skip lightly over the matter—both civil fraud and go-to-jail criminal fraud.

In this regard, the FCIC report resembles a giant haystack sprinkled with sharp needles. Somewhere in the FCIC’s daunting details are explosive revelations. But can citizens find or understand them? Not very likely; the six Democratic commissioners who produced the final report don’t mention any needles or provide any clues about how to find them. Instead, the commission blandly states that it has referred “potential violations” to “appropriate authorities.” But it won’t say how many cases were passed along to prosecutors or whether they involve big-name bankers or low-level clerks forging mortgage documents.

“Our job is to bring out the facts. It is the prosecutor’s job to prosecute the facts,” commission chair Phil Angelides insisted when I badgered him on this point. With some outside prompting from bloggers and other informed observers, I was able to locate a couple of needles amid the voluminous text. They implicate some of the best names on Wall Street. But for whatever reasons, the commission Democrats framed their findings in broadly critical accusations about the financial industry, government regulators, the Federal Reserve and others whose failures caused the eventual collapse. “We conclude this financial crisis was avoidable,” the commissioners declare. The FCIC’s facts confirm that judgment. Read the report or graze the 1,200 documents posted on the FCIC website (fcic.gov). You will doubtless come away dizzy but enlightened and angry.

For instance, I choked on this language: “As a nation, we must also accept responsibility for what we permitted to occur. Collectively, but certainly not unanimously, we acquiesced to or embraced a system that…gave rise to our present predicament.” That sounds like the same self-serving baloney the establishment can be counted on to deploy to avoid blame.

If everyone is to blame, then no one can be blamed. This reminds me of when the Iraq War went bad, and the Bush administration couldn’t find the WMDs. People who had led cheers for war started saying, “Well, we were all fooled, weren’t we?” No, we were not. Congress and the Obama administration took a similar tack on the financial crisis. It would be wrong and vengeful, they said, to point fingers at major miscreants. In this complacent milieu, referring cases to the Justice Department is not exactly comforting. Angry citizens want to know why more people didn’t go to jail.

For one example of the FCIC’s buried treasures, turn to page 165 and read about the true meaning of “due diligence.” In 2006–07, an auditing firm, Clayton Holdings, was hired to examine some 900,000 mortgages. It found that 255,000 (28 percent) were flawed and should not have been packaged as mortgage-backed securities. Clayton’s president delicately described the high deficiency rate as “a quality control issue.” But the banks went ahead and included nearly 100,000 of the dubious loans in new securities anyway, without informing the buyers. “They knew a significant percentage of the sampled loans did not meet their own underwriting standards or those of the originators,” the FCIC concluded. “Nonetheless, they sold those securities to investors. The Commission’s review of many prospectuses provided to investors found that this critical information was not disclosed.”

This smells like old-fashioned investor fraud. The biggest players were Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Morgan Stanley and three leading European banks. The FCIC observed that this sleight-of-hand occurred when the housing market began to collapse and banks were eager to dump their rotten assets. It has provided a wealth of material evidence for the growing flood of investor lawsuits. Even the Federal Reserve is suing financiers to recover on the bad assets it was sold.

Shouldn’t someone go to jail? Determining criminal intent is always difficult. Corporate law is a thicket of exemptions and clever distinctions designed to shield the big boys at the top. If the feds got serious, they would apply the same techniques used against Mafia dons. First “squeeze” lesser players down below—traders, salesmen, accountants—then “turn” them into government witnesses. Build a chain of evidence against those who knew the score and gave the orders. What did the titans know and when did they know it?

If President Obama wanted to address the random rage accumulating around the country, this could be his issue (Republicans are freaked out by any suggestion that capitalists did anything wrong). Instead of ignoring the FCIC report, the president should embrace its content and demand an aggressive follow-up by federal prosecutors and regulatory agencies.

The issue at stake here is far more threatening than smug elites seem to understand. Nothing erodes the authority and legitimacy of government more severely than a spreading awareness of unequal justice. The feds send hapless drug mules to prison for twenty years. For billion-dollar swindles, they won’t even call a grand jury. This corrosive contradiction can become a national disease. Americans are learning from these events—another investigation with shocking evidence, but not much happens afterward. This will sound farfetched, I know, but this is a road that leads eventually to Cairo.

WILLIAM GREIDER
Patricia J. Williams
The Tiger Mama Syndrome

Amy Chua does not hold the patent on prejudice. There are lots of ways to spin a stereotype, and that she calls herself a “Chinese” mother in her hotly debated book on parenting, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, plays well against cultural anxieties about American economic status. But for heaven’s sake—the woman was born in Illinois!

No doubt that Chua and her daughters have put in the requisite 10,000 hours it takes to be fluent in any subject, but the Ivy League is chock-full of accomplished people who put in such hours. They come from all over the United States and all over the world. Some growing percentage of them are the products of yuppie, uppity, narcissistic helicopter parents—hockey dads, stage moms, the kind of people who would rather see their child drop dead of heatstroke while running a race than see that child give up. Like Chua, they do so in the name of all sorts of higher values—family honor, Catholic guilt, team spirit, Texan bragging rights, Jamaican superiority, Jewish destiny, women’s equality, Norwegian sang-froid, black pride, Hindu nationalism, immigrant striving, Protestant ethic, true grit. The world is a queasy, uncertain place right now, and what it takes to compete in the rat race exposes our kids to ever-increasing rates of depression, mental illness and substance abuse.

That said, the Ivy League is also home to a much larger group of people who work hard, who love their chosen pursuits, who are happily well-adjusted, yet who did not acquire their highly effective study habits by being turned out into the snow when they were 2 years old—a form of “discipline” Chua brags about. Some of them are even Chinese. Likewise, there are many Ivy Leaguers who do not believe that their accomplishment makes them less “American” or “Western.” They don’t spend time worrying, as Chua does, that if they “feel that they have individual rights guaranteed by the US Constitution” they will be “much more likely to disobey their parents and ignore career advice.”

So let’s not spend too much time wondering why Chua assigns her neurosis to her Chinese-ness rather than to her aspirational American upper-middle-class-ness. What I find more intriguing is not so much her obsession with academic success but her pathological yearning for dominance, control, standing and respect. Chua does not just want perfect scores; she is desperately afraid that she and her daughters will be drowned in the cold goop of what she endlessly refers to as “decline.”

Chua’s fears are not confined by race, ethnicity or personal effort alone. After all, in Greece and France students have been rioting because of the rising costs of a good education and the paucity of jobs. In Akron, Ohio, an African-American tiger mother named Kelley Williams-Bolar was recently prosecuted for lying about where she lived so she could get her children into a decent school district. In California, immigrant kids of Mexican parents are battling for the right to pay in-state tuition at public universities. In Memphis there are fights about whether integrating a poor school district with a wealthier suburban one would constitute a “theft” of education. In London, a woman named Mrinal Patel was accused of fraud for misrepresenting her address so as to qualify her child for a better school. There are few places, in other words, where people are not worried about the quality of life and distribution of resources on a crowded planet.

At the same time, if Singapore, China and Hong Kong are producing a greater number of students with musical proficiency and excellent test scores, it’s because they have made huge public investments in education. They make musical instruments available to students—as the United States once did in the first part of the twentieth century. They have teachers certified in the subjects they teach—as was the case in Russian schools during the Sputnik era. “Westerners” are not nearly as lacking in work ethic as Chua maintains; but you don’t get to Yale if your elementary school has no books. You don’t rank first in the world in science if, as in the United States, 60 percent of your biology teachers are reluctant to teach evolution—and 13 percent teach creationism instead.

It would be so deliciously convenient if calling your kids “garbage”—another parenting trick Chua boasts about—actually turned them into little engines that could. But our larger educational crisis will involve a public investment that simply does not correlate with shooting down the self-esteem of children or disrespecting the “Western-ness” of the parents who struggle to raise them.

Finally, Amy Chua exhibits an excruciating self-consciousness about how she is seen in a racialized public imagination. She is riddled with angst about not betraying her status as a “model minority” who’s “supposed” to be smart in music, math and science. She even “disciplines” one of her daughters by threatening to adopt a “real” Chinese kid. Even as her narrative is swaddled in Dragon Lady analogies, every line is inflected by very American prejudices and divisive ethnic generalizations. Indeed, if you take away the peculiarly manic quality that is Chua’s alone, her anxieties are no different from a lot of “buffer” groups whose inroads on the edges of assimilation mark them, and whose successes are watched reproachfully, jealously by the larger society. The Kennedys walked this walk for the Irish. Fiorello La Guardia complained of it when he was the “breakthrough” Italian. Condoleezza Rice’s and Michelle Obama’s parents toiled and pushed for them in ways typical of a generation of civil rights babies. In other words, this tensely, needily overachieving mentality is hardly unique. It is not necessarily or even probably generated from Chua’s romanticized motherland. Our collective dilemma, and the most poignant challenge presented by her book, is how to survive in a world where the slightest nonconformity risks landing you outside—of a home, of a job, of a life—and left to stand by yourself, alone in the freezing cold.
Eric Alterman

The Conservative Class War, Continued

It was a terrible tabloid tale. While New York City was buried under a blizzard, widows and orphans freezing and starving in their apartments, union fat cats swigged brewskis and chuckled to themselves as sanitation workers conspired to stage a slowdown to gain leverage in their contract negotiations. “The selfish Sanitation bosses who sabotaged the blizzard cleanup to fire a salvo at City Hall targeted politically connected and well-heeled neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn to get their twisted message across loud and clear,” screamed Rupert Murdoch’s New York Post. From there, the story ricocheted across the media, to Investor’s Business Daily to Fox News (naturally), and even to Saturday Night Live. The Washington Times ran an op-ed that began, “Cross us and people will die.”

Alas, it never happened. The source of all this hysteria was a sketchy story told by Daniel Halloran, a rookie councilman and Tea Party Republican—who is also an adherent of the neo-pagan religion Theodicism. A New York Times investigation weeks later found no evidence to support the allegation, and it turns out that Halloran isn’t so sure about what he thought he heard after all. But the damage is done. (Murdoch properties are not exactly famous for correcting their errors; though, to be fair, if they did, there would hardly be time or space for anything else.)

Can it be mere coincidence that the right-wing media promoted this phony-baloney story at a moment when, as Charles Loveless, legislative director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, points out, conservatives are “readying a massive assault” on the pensions and benefits of these same employees?

Led by Newt Gingrich, conservatives are floating the notion that states should be allowed to declare bankruptcy to escape their pension obligations to firefighters, cops, teachers and, yes, sanitation workers. Gingrich called on House Republicans “to move a bill in the first month or so of their tenure to create a venue for state bankruptcy.” This was followed by a plea in The Weekly Standard by University of Pennsylvania law professor David Skeel titled “Give States a Way to Go Bankrupt.” Skeel later told a reporter that he had “never had anything I’ve written get as much attention as that piece.” He said he had been contacted by lawmakers from all over.

Depending on the audience, this discussion serves multiple purposes. Most obviously it is intended to blame the unions for local fiscal woes and garner support from the public for the coming assault on their pensions. Second, it serves to intimidate the unions and encourage givebacks lest these same officials be forced to go before taxpayers with a plan to cut services, raise taxes or both—making public unions the culprit in any of those options. Third, it weakens the unions’ appeal to new workers, for if they can’t protect the pensions of their workers, what’s the point of joining in the first place? Given that public unions provide the lion’s share of poll workers, envelope stuffers and other volunteers for Democratic campaigns, this is hardly an ancillary benefit, from the right’s perspective. With private union membership now in single digits, public unions remain just about the only institutions with sufficient financial and organizational muscle to make a difference in close elections at the state and local levels or to organize progressive pushback against corporate malfeasance.

The assault on public employee unions is the next phase of a forty-year class war in America by the rich against the rest of us. It is of a piece with the steady dismantling of our progressive taxation system and the explosion of economic inequality. Total income going to the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans has risen from about 8 percent in the 1960s to more than 20 percent today. As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson demonstrate in their recent book, Winner-Take-All Politics, this is the result of deliberate policy choices made by politicians in the service of those who fund their campaigns. Congress has repeatedly cut tax rates on top earners, along with capital gains and estate taxes. And as Robert Lieberman, writing in Foreign Affairs, recalls, during the 1990s the Financial Accounting Standards Board, which regulates accounting practices, attempted to put a stop to the practice of allowing corporate CEOs to compensate themselves with massive stock-option packages, correctly predicting that it would lead to an epidemic of deceptive accounting practices. “But Congress, spurred on by the lobbying efforts of major corporations, stopped the FASB in its tracks.” The result? For the past twenty years we’ve allowed CEOs to enrich themselves at the expense of employees and stockholders “through the mutual back-scratching habits of corporate boards.”

In the meantime, statistics demonstrate the speciousness of the conservative case for states facing budget crises to default on their public pension obligations. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities released a report recently demonstrating that, in fact, they have “adequate tools and means to meet their obligations.” To the degree that some states appear to be in real trouble, explains a June report by two Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco analysts, this the result of a “profound macroeconomic shock” rather than pension obligations. Yet another recent study—this one from Boston College’s Center for Retirement Research—found that while many state pension funds may be “substantially underfunded,” they account for just 3.8 percent of state and local spending and could be covered with an increase to just 5 percent.

Yet snowjobs like those promoted by Murdoch, Gingrich and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie are painting a bull’s-eye on the back of public unions. “People I don’t even know are calling me horrible names,” Marie Corfield, a New Jersey art teacher who found herself on the other end of Christie’s antiunion rant, told the New York Times. “The mantra is that the problem is the unions, the unions, the unions.”

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The Liberal Media

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Imagine a parallel universe where the Great Crash of 2008 was followed by a Tea Party of a very different kind. Enraged citizens gather in every city, week after week—to demand the government finally regulate the behavior of corporations and the superrich, and force them to start paying taxes. The protesters shut down the shops and offices of the companies that have most aggressively ripped off the country. The swelling movement is made up of everyone from teenagers to pensioners. They surround branches of the banks that caused this crash and force them to close, with banners saying, You Caused This Crisis. Now YOU Pay.

As people see their fellow citizens acting in self-defense, these tax-the-rich protests spread to even the most conservative parts of the country. It becomes the most-discussed subject on Twitter. Even right-wing media outlets, sensing a startling effect on the public mood, begin to praise the uprising, and dig up damning facts on the tax dodgers.

Instead of the fake populism of the Tea Party, there is a movement based on real populism. It shows that there is an alternative to making the poor and the middle class pay for a crisis caused by the rich. It shifts the national conversation. Instead of letting the government cut our services and increase our taxes, the people demand that it cut the endless and lavish aid for the rich and make them pay the massive sums they dodge in taxes.

This may sound like a fantasy—but it has all happened. The name of this parallel universe is Britain. As recently as this past fall, people here were asking the same questions liberal Americans have been glumly contemplating: Why is everyone being so passive? Why are we letting ourselves be ripped off? Why are people staying in their homes watching their flat-screens while our politicians strip away services so they can fatten the superrich even more?

And then twelve ordinary citizens—a nurse, a firefighter, a student, a TV researcher and others—met in a pub in London one night and realized they were asking the wrong questions. “We had spent all this energy asking why it wasn’t happening,” says Tom Philips, a 23-year-old nurse who was there that night, “and then we suddenly said, That’s what everybody else is saying too. Why don’t we just do it? Why don’t we just start? If we do it, maybe everybody will stop asking why it isn’t happening and join in. It’s a bit like that Kevin Costner film Field of Dreams. We thought, If you build it, they will come.”

The new Conservative-led government in Britain is imposing the most extreme cuts to public spending the country has seen since the 1920s. The fees for going to university are set to triple. Children’s hospitals like Great Ormond Street are facing 20 percent cuts in their budgets. In London alone, more than 200,000 people are being forced out of their homes and out of the city as the government takes away their housing subsidies.

Amid all these figures, this group of friends made some startling observations. Here’s one. All the cuts in housing subsidies, driving all those people out of their homes, are part of a package of cuts to the poor, adding up to £7 billion. Yet the magazine Private Eye reported that one company alone—Vodafone, one of Britain’s leading cellphone firms—owed an outstanding bill of £6 billion to the British taxpayers. According to Private
Eye, Vodaphone had been refusing to pay for years, claiming that a crucial part of its business ran through a post office box in ultra-low-tax Luxembourg. The last Labour government, for all its many flaws, had insisted it pay up.

But when the Conservatives came to power, David Hartnett, head of the British equivalent of the Internal Revenue Service, apologized to rich people for being “too black and white about the law.” Soon after, Vodafone’s bill was reported to be largely canceled, with just over £1 billion paid in the end. Days later George Osborne, the finance minister, was urging people to invest in Vodafone by taking representatives of the company with him on a taxpayer-funded trip to India—a country where that company is also being pursued for unpaid taxes. Vodafone and Hartnett deny this account, claiming it was simply a longstanding “dispute” over fees that ended with the company paying the correct amount. The government has been forced under pressure to order the independent National Audit Office to investigate the affair and to pore over every detail of the corporation’s tax deal.

“It was clear to us that if this one company had been made to pay its taxes, people could have been kept in their homes,” says Sam Greene, another of the protesters. “We keep being told there’s no alternative to cutting services. This just showed it was rubbish. So we decided we had to do something.”

They resolved to set up an initial protest that would prick people’s attention. They called themselves UK Uncut and asked several liberal-left journalists, on Twitter (full disclosure: I was one of them), to announce a time and place where people could meet “to take direct action protest against the cuts and show there’s an alternative.” People were urged to gather at 9:30 am on a Wednesday morning outside the Ritz hotel in central London and look for an orange umbrella. More than sixty people arrived, and they went to one of the busiest Vodafone stores—on Oxford Street, the city’s biggest shopping area—and sat down in front of it so nobody could get in.

“What really struck me is that when we explained our reasons, ordinary people walking down Oxford Street were incredibly supportive,” says Alex Miller, a 31-year-old nurse. “People would stop and tell us how they were terrified of losing their homes and their jobs—and when they heard that virtually none of it had to happen if only these massive companies paid their taxes, they were furious. Several people stopped what they were doing, sat down and joined us. I guess it’s at that point that I realized this was going to really take off.”

That first protest grabbed a little media attention—and then the next day, in a different city, three other Vodafone stores were shut down in the northern city of Leeds, by unconnected protests. UK Uncut realized this could be replicated across the country. So the group set up a Twitter account and a website, where members announced there would be a national day of protest the following Saturday. They urged anybody who wanted to organize a protest to e-mail them so it could be added to a Google map. Britain’s most prominent tweeters, such as actor Stephen Fry, joined in.

That Saturday Vodafone’s stores were shut down across the country by peaceful sit-ins. The crowds sang songs and announced they had come as volunteer tax collectors. Prime Minister David Cameron wants axed government services to be replaced by a “Big Society,” in which volunteers do the jobs instead. So UK Uncut announced it was the Big Society Tax Collection Agency.

The mix of people who turned out was remarkable. There were 16-year-olds from the housing projects who had just had their £30-a-week subsidy for school taken away. There were 78-year-olds facing the closure of senior centers where they can meet their friends and socialize. A chuckling 64-year-old woman named Mary James said, “The scare stories will say this protest is being hijacked by anarchists. If anything, it’s being hijacked by pensioners!” They stopped passers-by to explain why they were protesting by asking, “Sir, do you pay your taxes? So do I. Did you know that Vodafone doesn’t?”

The police looked on, bemused. There wasn’t much they could do: in a few places, they surrounded the Vodafone stores before the protesters arrived, stopping anyone from going in or out—in effect doing the protesters’ job for them. One police officer asked me how this tax dodge had been allowed to happen, and when I explained, he said, “So you mean I’m likely to lose my job because these people won’t pay up?”

UK Uncut organized entirely on Twitter, asking what it should do next and taking votes. There was an embarrassment of potential targets: the National Audit Office found in 2007 that a third of the country’s top 700 corporations paid no tax at all. UK Uncut decided to expose and protest one of the most egregious alleged tax dodgers: Sir Philip Green. He is the ninth-richest man in the country, running some of the leading High Street chain stores, including Topshop, Miss Selfridge and British Home Stores. Although he lives and works in Britain, and his companies all operate on British streets, he avoids British taxes by claiming his income is “really” earned by his wife, who lives in the tax haven of Monaco. In 2005 the BBC calculated that he earned £1.2 billion and paid nothing in taxes—dodging more than £300 million in taxes.

Far from objecting, Cameron’s government appointed Green as an official adviser, with special responsibility for “cutting waste.” So UK Uncut drew a direct line from Green’s tax exemption to the cuts in services for ordinary people. For example, Cameron had just announced the closure of the school sports partnership, which makes it possible for millions of schoolchildren to engage in healthy, competitive exercise. The protesters

If this one company had been made to pay its taxes, people could have been kept in their homes.’ —protester Sam Greene

Johann Hari is a columnist for the Independent in London and a contributing writer for Slate.
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The protests began to influence the political debate. Public opinion had already been firmly for pursuing tax dodgers, with 77 percent telling YouGov pollsters there should be a crackdown. But by dramatizing and demonstrating this mood, the protesters forced it onto the agenda—and stripped away Cameron’s claims that there was no alternative to his cuts.

Polly Toynbee is one of Britain’s most influential columnists: imagine Maureen Dowd with principles instead of snark. Toynbee attended the London protests and was manhandled out of Topshop by security guards. She reported later that the protests were being watched very nervously on Downing Street. “It is no coincidence that the government immediately hurried out a ‘clampdown’ on tax avoidance, collecting £2 billion,” she tells me, “or that [its coalition partners] the Liberal Democrats suddenly remembered this was one of their big commitments.

At every protest, a clear and direct line was drawn from tax avoidance to real people's lives. If they pay their bill, you won’t be forced out of your home. If they pay their bill, your grandmother won’t lose her government support. If they pay their bill, our children’s hospitals won’t be slashed.

UK Uncut’s Ten-Step Guide to Building a Left-Wing Tea Party

1. Get some friends you trust and respect, and identify a tax dodger to target.
2. Find the company’s flagship store in your neighborhood. Scout it out. Determine the best way to shut it down.
3. Pick a meeting point and time. Ask some high-profile people to tweet a link explaining what you are doing and why. Ask Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, Glenn Greenwald—anybody who can reach thousands of people quickly.
4. Send the call out to as many active networks as possible. For example, the Coffee Party got a huge number of followers on Facebook but hasn’t done much—why not turn it into a network to organize this?
5. Pick a Twitter hashtag so people can follow the action as you shut down the target.
6. As soon as you’ve done this, put a call out for people to copy you, wherever they are around the country, on a certain day.
7. Set up a website to list all the actions being planned, all the information on the targets and all the resources people will need. Use a Google map to show where all the actions are planned.
8. Choose a few carefully crafted key messages and repeat them over and over again to the media. Explain that if X company paid its taxes, Y budget cut or tax increase wouldn’t have to happen.
9. Call days of action. Aim to have shutdowns arranged in as many cities as possible.
Of course, that sum is only a drop in the ocean. But this really was a jolt to the political system. It was hugely important."

But perhaps the most striking response was from the right. One of Britain’s most famous businessmen, Duncan Bannatyne, came out in support of the protests, declaring, “We need to rebel against tax dodgers...as Government won’t.” The Financial Times conceded that “the protesters have a point” but then grumbled about them. Surprisingly, the Daily Mail, Britain’s most right-wing newspaper, became one of the movement’s most sympathetic allies. The editors could see that their Middle England readers were outraged to be paying more taxes than the super rich. So they ran their own exposé on Philip Green’s tax affairs, along with straightforward and detailed reporting of the protests.

The only part of the media that attacked UK Uncut outright was, predictably, Rupert Murdoch’s empire. This isn’t surprising given that his company, News International, is one of the world’s most egregious tax dodgers, contributing almost nothing to the US or UK treasuries. His tabloid the Sun accused UK Uncut of being a “group of up to 30,000 anarchists” scheming “to bring misery to millions of Christmas shoppers,” with plans to “set off stink bombs, leave mouldy cheese in clothes and rack up huge sales at tills and then refuse to pay.” After one of the people named in the article reported the Sun to the Press Complaints Commission, the newspaper was forced to retract the article by removing it from its website.

But these smear jobs were the best the right could muster. Conservatives ran into hiding, with almost nobody prepared to defend tax avoiders. Only a few stray voices emerged: ultra-conservative blogger Tim Montgomerie, regarded as highly influential with Cameron; and Labour MP Tom Harris, our equivalent of a Blue Dog Democrat. They argued that tax avoidance is legal and therefore fine. The protesters responded that they were obviously arguing for a change in the law.

The tax-evasion defenders also tried to argue that a crackdown would “drive away” corporations, to the detriment of the nation. But the corporations are already, for all intents and purposes, “away.” They pay nothing to Britain. They have relocated everything they can. They can’t, however, physically relocate their British shops to Bangalore. It’s impossible. That remnant can certainly be taxed. What are they going to do?

Besides, the right’s claim that enforcing fair taxes drives away the rich was recently tested—and proved wrong. Toward the end of the last Labour government, officials increased the top tax rate to 50 percent. (This is still far short of the 90 percent levied on US taxpayers by President Eisenhower, during the biggest boom in American history.) Conservatives predicted disaster: London Mayor Boris Johnson said it would reduce the city to a ghost town as bankers fled to Switzerland. Yet after the taxes rose, the number of rich people applying for visas to leave Britain for Switzerland actually fell by 7 percent.

After the empirical argument collapsed, a few on the right tried to shift the argument to a moral one. They said that Green “earns all his money on his own,” so why should he have to pay any of it back to the rest of us? I responded on TV and in a blog post by suggesting a small experiment. Let’s take one branch of Topshop, and for twelve months we’ll deny any services funded by collective taxation to that store. When the rubbish piles up, we won’t send garbage men to collect it. When the rat outbreak begins, we won’t send pest control. When they catch a shoplifter, we won’t send the police. When there’s a fire, we won’t send the fire brigade. When suppliers want to get their goods to the store, there may be a problem: we won’t maintain the roads. When the employees get sick, we won’t treat them in the publicly funded hospitals. Then let Philip Green come back and tell us he does it all himself.

The last argument of the defenders has been to say it’s impossible to do anything about tax havens, so we’ll just have to accept them. But this is false. After the 9/11 attacks, the world—under US pressure—passed virtually universal laws to freeze Al Qaeda–related accounts and so prevent them from stashing or accessing money from tax havens. Where there is political will, they can be brought to heel rapidly. In the early 1960s Monaco was refusing to hand over details of French tax dodgers to the French authorities. President Charles de Gaulle surrounded the

This movement is shaped like a beehive, or like Twitter itself. There is no center, no leadership. Just a shared determination not to be bilked.

There has been an obsessive hunt by the media to discover who UK Uncut “really are.” They assume there must be secretive leaders pulling the strings somewhere. But the more I dug into the movement, the more I realized this is a misunderstanding. The old protest movements were modeled like businesses, with a CEO and a managing board. This protest movement, however, is shaped like a hive of bees, or like Twitter itself. There is no center. There is no leadership. There is just a shared determination not to be bilked, connected by tweets. Every decision made by UK Uncut is open and driven by the will of its participants. Alongside many people who had never protested, activists from across the spectrum have poured into the movement, from the students occupying their universities to protest the massive hike in fees, to antipoverty groups like War on Want, to trade unions. Indeed, even the trade union at Britain’s IRS came out in support, with ordinary tax collectors rebelling against their bosses for letting the rich wriggle out of taxes.

Think of it as an open-source protest, or wikiprotest. It uses Twitter as the basic software, but anyone can then mold the protest. The Western left has been proud of its use of social media and blogging, but all too often this hasn’t amounted to much
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more than clicktivism. By contrast, these protesters have tried at every turn to create a picture of George Osborne, Cameron’s finance minister, sitting in his office, about to sign off on another big tax break for a rich person, paid for by cuts to the rest of us. Is a big Facebook group going to stop him? No. Is an angry buzz on the blogosphere going to stop him? No. But what these protesters have done—putting all the online energy into the streets and straight into the national conversation—just might. And by creating a media buzz, it draws in people from far beyond the tech-savvy Twitterverse, with older activist groups—from trade unions to charities—clamoring to join.

As one UK Uncut participant, Becky Anadeche, explains, “So many campaigns rely on the premise that the less you ask somebody to do, the more likely they are to do it. This campaign has proved the opposite. People who have never even been on a protest before have been organizing them.”

British liberals and left-wingers have been holding marches and protests for years and been roundly ignored. So why did UK Uncut suddenly gain such traction? Alex Higgins, another protester, explains, “It’s because we broke the frame that people expect protest to be confined to. Suddenly, protesters were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.” A wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.” A wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.” A wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.” A wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.” A wave of testers were somewhere they weren’t supposed to be—they were not in the predictable place where they are tolerated and regarded as harmless by the authorities. If UK Uncut had just consisted of a march on Whitehall [where government departments are located], where we listened to a few speakers and went home, nobody would have heard of it. But this time we went somewhere unanticipated. We disrupted something they really value: trade.”

British Liberal Democrats are acting like “50 Herbert Hoovers…slashing spending in a time of recession, often at the expense both of their most vulnerable constituents and of the nation’s economic future.”

Second, most of these cuts could be prevented simply by requiring super-rich individuals and corporations to pay their taxes. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) calculated in 2008 that eighty-three of the 100 biggest US corporations hide fortunes in tax havens. And even without these shelters, the rich have been virtually exempted from taxes across America. Billionaire Warren Buffet recently conducted a straw poll in his office and found he paid a lower proportion of his income in taxes than anybody else there—and considerably less than his secretary. Indeed, tax expert Nicholas Shaxson says that in many ways “America itself is a tax haven for many rich people.”

WikiLeaks is poised to release the details of a whole raft of corporations and banks using tax havens in the Cayman Islands, laying out the dodging for all to see.

And third, public opinion is firmly behind going after the rich and corporations. A poll in January for 60 Minutes and Vanity Fair asked Americans which policy they would choose to reduce the deficit. By far the most popular, chosen by 61 percent of respondents, was to increase taxes on the rich. The next most popular, chosen by 20 percent, was to cut military spending. Other polls bear this out.

So Americans are facing the same cuts as the Brits. They are being ripped off by corporations and rich people just like the Brits. And they are as angry as the Brits. “All it takes,” says Tom Philips, “is for a few people to do what we did in that pub that night and light the touch paper.”

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised to go after tax havens. He pointed out that one building in the Cayman Islands claims to house 12,000 corporations, and said: “That’s either the biggest building or the biggest tax scam on record.” He promised he would “pay for every dime” of his spending and tax cut proposals “by closing corporate loopholes and tax havens.”

Yet in office he hasn’t done this. In 2009 Congress passed the Foreign Accounts Tax Compliance Act, which shuffled a few inches forward but still doesn’t even require the automatic exchange of information from tax havens that EU law requires as a matter of right. So if a rich person opens a tax account in the Cayman Islands and hides his money there, the IRS isn’t told and doesn’t know. Yes, President Obama’s deficit commission made a few passing noises about closing tax loopholes, but the bulk of its recommendations and energy focused on going after benefits for the poor and middle class, like Social Security.

What should US Uncut target? “It’s important to go after brand names that exist in every city in America,” says Tom Purley, a UK Uncut participant. “The key to our success was that it was so easily replicated. People could do it anywhere. It took something that seems like a remote issue and connected it to a place they see every day.” Most of the companies that engage in the worst tax avoidance in the United States are Big Pharma and financial companies, which don’t have stores. But the GAO also named a number of major brands that are exploiting tax havens. They include Apple, Bank of America, Best Buy, ExxonMobil, FedEx (whose president, Frederick Smith, was named by Obama as the businessman he most admires), Kraft Foods, McDonald’s, Safeway and Target. That’s a wealth of potential targets.

American citizens should ask themselves: I work hard and pay my taxes, so why don’t the richest people and the corporations? Why should I pick up the entire tab for keeping the
nation running? Why should the people who can afford the most pay the least? If you’re happy with that situation, you can stay at home and leave the protesting to the Tea Party. For the rest, there’s an alternative. For too long, progressive Americans have been lulled into inactivity by Obama’s soaring promises, which come to little. As writer Rebecca Solnit says, “Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky…. Hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency.” UK Uncut has just shown Americans how to express real hope—and build a left-wing Tea Party.

The Most Feminist Place in the World

After a testosterone-fueled boom and bust, the women of Iceland took charge.

by JANET ELISE JOHNSON

Despite the damp autumn weather, at 2:25 PM on October 25 some 50,000 Icelandic women and their supporters—nearly one-sixth of Iceland’s population—left their jobs or homes and marched down the main street in Reykjavik. The walkout, called Women Strike Back, was a call for “women’s freedom from male violence and the closing of the gender pay gap.” Official statistics show that Icelandic women earn 65.65 percent of men’s average wages. And, as one right-wing city councilwoman texted to her Left-Green Movement colleague Sóley Tómasdóttir, after being chastised for trying to schedule a meeting at 3 o’clock that day, 2:25 PM was the time “when we have already worked for our wages” (that is, 65.65 percent of a regular 9-to-5 workday). More a women’s holiday than a strike—most in attendance had permission from their workplaces or were on a school holiday—it was a reminder of the more radical women’s day off in 1975 and a similar walkout in 2005. As Auður Stýrskársdóttir, director of the Icelandic women’s history archives, says, “Now it’s a thing that Icelandic women do.”

This walkout happened two weeks after Iceland was officially proclaimed, for the second year in a row, the most feminist place in the world, the top scorer on the World Economic Forum’s 2010 Global Gender Gap Rankings, followed by three other Nordic countries: Norway, Finland and Sweden. Iceland, by 2010, according to the report’s authors, had closed 85 percent of the achievement gap between women and men—proving itself to have more gender equality than 133 other countries measured in the study, including the United States (which jumped from thirty-first on the list to nineteenth).

When the walkout was held five years ago, it was a very different moment in Iceland’s history. Icelanders were among the wealthiest people in the world, engaging in frenzied spending. They were buying up luxury goods and were sold mortgages in foreign currency, brokered on faith in the continued boom in Iceland’s currency. As the 2005 event organizer noted about 2010, “It’s a changed society”—more equal but much poorer and awaiting potentially devastating budget cuts in 2011.

The story of Iceland’s economic rise and fall is long and complex, but it was driven by a faction called the Locomotive Group, which enthusiastically embraced Milton Friedman’s version of neoliberalism and then overturned the political order to ensure its success. The most prominent member was Davíð Oddsson, who became the head of the leading party, the center-right Independence Party, then prime minister for an unprecedentedly long time (1991–2004) and, finally, chair of the Central Bank (2005–09).

As in the United States, where almost all hedge-fund managers are men, Iceland’s Locomotive Group is a masculine enterprise. Overwhelmingly constituted of men, the group’s network of financiers and policy-makers created an environment where short-term profits trumped long-term growth and accountability to investors and citizens. Many lived it up in fast cars, fancy suits, bars and, according to Feminist Society of Iceland spokeswoman Halla Gunnarsdóttir, strip clubs. They made the argument that only men, not women, have what it takes, the bravado to take enormous risks.

The gender pay gap that persists in Iceland is partly a legacy of the outsize salaries raked in by men in the financial sector during the boom. But the country’s unique and powerful feminist traditions ensured that it would have a markedly different response to the financial crisis from countries like the United States, where the role of masculinity has gone largely unexamined—with nary a mention in the newly released report from the Financial Crisis Commission on the causes of the meltdown.

When I traveled to Iceland this past summer, people—from a tour guide to those I met on the street—casually referred to those who colluded with the Locomotive Group as “the men who stole all our money.” This common wisdom was recently confirmed by a study by prominent gender studies scholars from the University of Iceland, commissioned

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by Parliament. Thorgerdur Einarsdóttir and Gyda Margrét Pétursdóttir found that not only were a small network of men looking out only for themselves—rewarding themselves with the booty and protecting one another with unsound loans—but that the enterprise was being justified by calling upon mythical masculine ideals. As Iceland President Ölafur Ragnar Grímsson put it in his 2005 speech “How to Succeed in Modern Business: Lessons From the Icelandic Voyage,” the nation’s “successful entrepreneurs” were heirs to the daring, adventurous Viking tradition.

The casino economy also began to transform women’s roles. In this society where virtually all women work outside the home for most of their adult lives, more women began to stay home. According to the director of the Center for Gender Equality, the new bankers’ long hours meant their wives had to assume nearly all domestic responsibilities. The bankers’ high salaries, moreover, made it harder for their partners to “justify” their working, something Icelandic women had not previously had to do. As explained by Thorgerdur and Gyda Margrét, men were cast as the stars, with women as underpaid stagehands.

Given Iceland’s active women’s movement and the gendered lenses through which Icelanders saw the crisis, it is unsurprising that in the spring of 2009, when the government collapsed, Icelanders voted into office Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir—the country’s first female prime minister and the world’s first openly gay top leader—and the parties on the left that were the successors to the Women’s Alliance, a party of women for women. In 1999 the Women’s Alliance fractured and its members were absorbed by two umbrella parties, both of which adopted gender quotas for party lists and all elected bodies within the party. The Women’s Alliance had been a voice of reason during the privatization frenzy in 1998–2002, advocating keeping at least one national bank. In the wake of the 2008 collapse, people called for “feminine values” to replace the Viking hypermasculinity.

Most Western industrialized democracies have significantly closed the gap between women and men on measures of educational attainment and health, but what makes Iceland extraordinary, even among its Nordic peers, is the political empowerment of women. The women who make up almost half of the members of Parliament are following in the footsteps of Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, Iceland’s president from 1980 to 1996, the first democratically elected woman head of state in the world.

Iceland’s left government—a coalition of the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left–Green Movement—has passed a flurry of woman-friendly policies. A 2009 law, modeled on one in Sweden, criminalizes the purchase of sex, while continuing to protect women prostitutes from prosecution. Another closed down the strip clubs and eliminated lap dancing. A March 2010 law extended a 40 percent quota for women on most government boards of mid-size and large businesses. Other legislation last year included legalizing same-sex marriage and allowing access to donor eggs and sperm for single women and gay couples. Longer-term achievements of Iceland’s feminist movement have also included generous government-provided parental leave to be shared by women and men and subsidized high-quality pre-
schools and day care, which allow most parents to combine parenting and work.

By 2 o’clock on Women Strike Back day, the preschool down the street from the US Embassy was half empty of children when Hrönn Sveinsdóttir, pushing a double stroller carrying her 7-month-old girl, arrived to pick up her 3-year-old daughter, Nina. In the women’s strike of 1975 her mother had walked off her job at a bank despite condemnation and threats from her bosses and older women co-workers. Hrönn represents a new generation of feminists, having made a documentary film about her uncharacteristic entrance in a Miss Iceland beauty competition.

At 3 o’clock women began to crowd down Laugavegur, the main shopping street, passing by a bed decorated with pictures of women and men, boys and girls, with the provocative sign Who Is More Likely to Rape or to Be Raped? At the bottom of the hill, activists were dancing to Dolly Parton’s working woman’s anthem “9 to 5” and wearing huge blue- and pink-lensed “gender glasses,” which Jóhanna, as everyone calls the prime minister, had bought for all her ministers. For an hour, people continued to pack the street and then spread up a hill, the largest public space in 101 Reykjavík.

Standing in the freezing rain stood a crowd made up of families, often three generations—grandmothers, their daughters and their daughters’ children. Some were self-identified feminist activists, such as Hildur Fjóla Antonsdóttir, a member of the Feminist Association of Iceland; she held a segment of the blocklong red scarf that activists had stretched from the high court to the low court to call attention to the gap between the 270 rapes reported to activists in 2009 and the seven convictions. Most were like Alsa Sigurðardóttir, who does not call herself a feminist but who nonetheless came out with her 13-year-old daughter “to show that we [women] stand together, and this is ridiculous, this difference in wages.” Even the country’s small population of immigrant women—including a kindergarten teacher and a bartender I met taking cover in a nearby bus stop—were represented.

On a bandstand, activists sang songs from the earlier women’s liberation period of the movement and spoke about the continuing wage gap and the inadequacies of the government’s response to violence against women. Rashida Manjoo, the UN’s special rapporteur on violence against women, spoke about how participation in the march showed “the transformative potential of solidarity,” which was “creating awareness for the next generation.” Speakers also included Sigrún Pállina Ingvarsdóttir, who had accused the former bishop of Iceland of sexual assault and been forced abroad but was vindicated by a similar claim by the bishop’s daughter.

Activists had invited rock musicians to sing a tongue-in-cheek song about how a girlfriend had gone to school and become a “fucking feminist.” In the crowd, three college-age women carried a sign with the message We Want More Judges in High Heels. At a related conference the day before the walkout, activists from Stigamot, the rape crisis center in Reykjavik, gave Knut Storberget, Norwegian justice minister, black boxer-briefs with the words I Am Responsible written down the crotch.

Iceland’s women’s movement is one of the most active in the world, in striking contrast to the movement in countries like the United States, where it has been professionalized into social service agencies and the academy. The 1975 women’s strike—with an estimated 90 percent of women participating, according to the former President Vigdís—brought workplaces and homes to a standstill in what was, at the time, the largest rally in Iceland’s history. That first strike was so successful, according to Auður Styrkarsdóttir, because activists persuaded the labor unions and the federation of employees not to punish their women employees for walking out. The 2005 walkout had 50,000 participants in Reykjavik, 60,000 nationally, with less than two months of organizing. As Edda Jónsdóttir, project leader for the 2005 event, explained, such a feat was possible because of the coordination of the large variety of organizations across the country—what she called, in jest, a “mafia,” because the women involved “know everybody.” For Guðrún Jónsdóttir, an organizer of last year’s walkout, the 2010 mobilization was “empowerment at its best.” But she added, “This is a power we will find a way to activate, I promise you. We have still a lot to do.”

Iceland is also unusual in that its feminists quickly and directly entered the political fray. In 1981—a year after Vigdís was elected to the largely ceremonial role of president—activists launched the Women’s Alliance with the goals of ending gender inequality and fostering more consensus and care in politics. After winning in municipal elections in the two largest cities, candidates associated with the party entered Parliament with an estimated 90 percent of women participating, the 2010 mobilization was “empowerment at its best.” But she added, “This is a power we will find a way to activate, I promise you. We have still a lot to do.”

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Feminism has so infused politics that, a couple of years ago, the women members of Parliament performed The Vagina Monologues.
#1 You can read it on a Kindle
You can read it with Bobby Jindal
You can read it on a Sony Reader
Or while watching Derek Jeter
You can read it on your screen
You can read it while you clean
#32 You can read it while you cook
#11 On your iPad or your Nook
You can read it on your smart phone
#48 You can read it on the throne

Go to: TheNation.com/50ways
local and national governments for refusing to reveal gender equity data or for failing to file their required gender action plan. Last summer, according to the center's director, Kristín Astgeirsdóttir, a committee in Akureyri—Iceland's second-largest city, where the center is located—scour lists of municipal salaries to assess wage gaps and found that men's higher wages were a result of overtime and miscellaneous extra payments. The worst offenders were approached and told they could no longer earn these extras because of the city's family policy. Two men quit, but wages were equalized.

It is these politics that paved the way to the women-friendly policies passed in 2009 and 2010. Perhaps most transformative, by September 2013 the boards of publicly owned companies as well as joint-stock companies with more than fifty employees will be required to contain at least 40 percent women (or men). Companies with more than twenty-five employees must also report the gender balance in employment in general and in management. These requirements, according to Kristín should apply to the newly nationalized banks as well as the mid-size businesses that went bankrupt.

Iceland’s opening of the gender question after the financial crisis stands in stark contrast to what has occurred in the United States.

The new government also consults with organizations like the Feminist Association of Iceland, a network of young feminists founded in 2003 with the goal of fostering “critical and feminist discussions on all levels of the Icelandic society.” Its former spokeswoman, Katrín Anna Guðmundsdóttir, joined the finance ministry in charge of starting gender budgeting in Iceland. Gender budgeting, part of the coalition platform of the Social Democratic Alliance and Left-Green Movement, requires the assessment of all budgets and programs for their likely impact on women and gender equality. According to Katrín Anna, after the 2009 election a steering committee on gender budgeting recommended implementing pilot projects across all ministries, and all were funded in the 2011 budget. In contrast, according to recently published e-mails, the previous finance minister was consulting with the tycoons—and there was not even an inkling of the idea of gender budgeting. “The difference is,” says Katrín Anna, “political will and the decision to start implementing gender budgeting in Iceland.”

Building on the call by the Women’s Alliance for a more consensus-based kind of politics—and in response to citizen anger at the crisis and the IMF-required austerity plan—the government has supported open forums and called for a constitutional assembly. There are also new feminine spaces in the economy. As the economy went into overdrive, Kristín Pétursdóttir and Halla Tomasdóttir, who had been warning of disaster from her position at the Chamber of Commerce, founded Auður Capital, a “financial service company emphasizing feminine values and social responsibility.” Rather than predating gender equality on the similarity of women and men, Auður maintains that women have a different way of viewing the world, one that values “balance, diversity, emotional capital, risk awareness and profit with principles,” according to Auður’s spokesperson. “More and more people are coming [to believe that such values] should be embraced by the financial sector,” the group claims, pointing to the fact that Auður posted a profit in 2009 when many similar companies founeder.

And, surprising to anyone who was observing Iceland two years ago, under the stewardship of Prime Minister Jóhanna, the country’s economy appears firmly on the way to recovery.

Iceland’s opening of the gender question stands in stark contrast to what has occurred in the United States. Recently released studies suggest that, on average over the long term, women may be more successful investors and hedge-fund managers because they have a more reasoned approach to risk. But there has been little questioning of the role played by American notions of masculinity in our bubble.

And there has been little effort to bring women to power or to create institutions devoted to gender concerns, except for President Obama’s creation of the little-known White House Council on Women and Girls.

A large part of why Iceland is different in this regard is that its feminists have been able to create such broad support in society. To spearhead the 2010 walkout, organizers pulled together some twenty women’s organizations, virtually all of those active in Iceland, into an umbrella coalition. The response was overwhelming. Jón Gnarr, a stand-up comedian turned mayor of Reykjavik—the city is the largest employer of women—had sent a letter to all city employees to encourage women to participate. When asked publicly whether she was going to attend, the prime minister said yes, and that she had already published a letter in the local newspaper asking women to come out. Former President Vigdís, when I asked her whether she was going to participate, said, “Of course...I’ve always been there.” All weekend TV shows focused on the event, and the radio stations played the early women’s liberation music.

To recruit so broadly, activists made the tactical choice to use the language of “gender equality” rather than feminism. This might be less radical, but most Icelanders have been able to embrace the ideal of gender equality. To Icelandic activists, the word “feminism” is just not as important as its goals.

It’s not that Iceland has solved all of its women’s problems—the wage gap is slightly smaller now, but only because so many highly paid men lost out during the collapse. But activists have created what feminist political scientists have called a “triangle of empowerment”: strong activism, a critical contingent of feminist politicians, and feminist officials with legal authority to address inequality. Such broad-based institution-building—rather than the intergenerational infighting that seems to characterize the American feminist movement—is more likely to be successful in reducing gender inequality here in the United States.
A Conversation With Marshall Ganz

The legendary organizer speaks on the “story of the self” and where Obama went wrong.

by SASHA ABRAMSKY

Marshall Ganz opens the door to his large frame house on a residential street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Outside, a freezing late autumn rain is falling hard. Inside, it’s warm, calm. An eighteenth-century wind quintet, Mozart perhaps, is playing in the background. There are books everywhere, CDs stacked high—Ganz is a confessed opera fanatic—artwork lining the walls. A little painter’s palette resting atop a bookshelf filled with cookbooks is emblazoned with a quote from Claude Monet. It is ordered chaos, a clutter of intellectual themes and competing cultural expressions.

Over the old kitchen stove is an even older AFL-CIO sign: Union House. It’s an understatement. The occupant of the house is one of America’s great organizers, a man who has spent half a century organizing everyone from impoverished African-Americans in 1960s Mississippi to California farmworkers, from environmental advocates and Middle Eastern activists for women’s rights to the legions of young people who flocked to Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008.

Early on, Ganz realized Obama’s ability to connect with his audiences through his powerful voice, his ability to weave a personal narrative into a larger political morality tale. Back then he felt Obama had a rare opportunity to transform America’s political culture; more recently, he has written, sorrowfully, in a widely disseminated op-ed in the Los Angeles Times, about how the president has “lost his voice.” Why that might be the case is the central question Ganz grapples with these days. It’s more than a political conundrum; it is, somehow, almost an existential challenge.

Ganz, 67, is a large man, barefoot, wearing brown slacks and an untucked white T-shirt. His receding gray hair flows off his head, unkempt. Colleagues can hardly recollect ever seeing him in a jacket and tie. He doesn’t dress like your typical Harvard professor, they say affectionately. Then again, he doesn’t really act like your typical Harvard professor, either.

“He wants the world to be a better place; but he’s always engaged in making it so,” says Elizabeth City, 38-year-old executive director of the Doctor of Education Leadership Program at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. She has been working with Ganz recently to develop classes for grad students interested in becoming transformational education leaders and administrators. She stops, pauses, looks out her window. “He’s still trying to take on the whole world, as opposed to his little niche in it. He’s really unlike anyone else I know. There are only a few people I know who genuinely seem interested in each person they meet; he sees possibilities more than most people.”

A couple of days earlier Ganz, a lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government, had flown back from some work in Syria. The next morning he was due to fly to San Francisco; with a bit of luck, he’d have time to indulge in his favorite relaxation while there: heading down the coast to Monterey to walk along the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. In between, he had had outpatient cataract surgery on his left eye, which was covered with a large metallic surgical mesh taped to his cheek and forehead.

Ganz is a widower—his wife, Susan, also an organizer, died of leukemia in 2003. A few years ago he found he has an adult son, the product of a liaison in the 1960s. He had been given up for adoption at birth and decades later tracked down his birth parents. Ironically, the son, born when Ganz was a full-time organizer with California’s farmworkers, is now a peach grower in the Central Valley. He is married and has a young son of his own. Ganz, who had never had the time or inclination to nurture a family—“In the world of organizing there was a whole ethic about submersion of self into the work. It was wrong,” he says ruefully—suddenly found he had one waiting for him on the other side of the continent.

“We started e-mailing and sharing our stories,” Ganz says. “I started telling him where the family came from.” He went to visit. “It’s strange when you drive up to this house and see a guy who looks like your uncle, and a little guy who also looks like your uncle. There you go; life has its surprises!” The newly minted grandfather found he shares a love of Harry Potter movies with his grandson.

Sasha Abramsky writes regularly for The Nation. His most recent books are Breadline USA: The Hidden Scandal of American Hunger and How to Fix It and Inside Obama’s Brain. He lives in Sacramento.
But although the master storyteller will talk about this bizarre personal saga when asked, he is reticent on the details. In fact, when he tells the stories of his adventure-filled life, they tend to be about the world of his work rather than his relationships. It is the realm that Marshall Ganz most fully inhabits. He is always building new connections, new organizations, establishing working relationships with people in the world of education, business, religious studies, environmental activism, Middle East peace work and so on. His friend Ruth Wageman, a visiting faculty member in Harvard’s Department of Psychology with whom he worked on an extended project studying the leadership caliber and potential of the Sierra Club’s sixty-two local chapters, believes he chooses projects that carry a “moral punch,” that present a puzzle about developing on-the-ground leadership skills. Ganz says he’s most interested in taking on projects that will force him to learn something new.

In some ways Ganz seems to reinvent himself annually—like an elk growing a splendid set of antlers each year—compulsively moving on to new projects, new intellectual adventures, perhaps afraid his memories will run rampant if he stands still for more than a few minutes. He doesn’t sleep much and recharges not by relaxing but by interacting with other people—mostly decades younger than himself—and through finding new work challenges. Not long ago he got involved in projects with the Kennedy School’s Middle East Initiative, and over the past year has traveled to Syria, Jordan, the West Bank and Israel several times. “He’s more or less chronically overcommitted,” notes Wageman. “He’s classically extroverted.”

Ganz is teaching himself Arabic using tapes from Rosetta Stone as well as immersing himself in the history of the region. He has worked on training programs at the Amman Institute and other leading Middle Eastern policy think tanks. In January 2010, he brought together Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem, helping them build and develop their leadership and negotiation skills.

“It’s very impressive,” says Hilary Rantisi, director of the Middle East Initiative. Rantisi has worked with Ganz on several training programs for Middle Eastern organizers brought to Cambridge to discuss ways to improve civil institutions in their home countries. “He’s invested a lot of time and effort into this. It’s refreshing to see.”

Another friend, Rebecca Henderson, of the Harvard Business School, calls Ganz “the truest intellectual of anybody I know. He is what I always dreamed of as an intellectual—widely read, using knowledge for public good.”

Ganz invites me to sit down at his kitchen table and immediately starts asking me questions: where I grew up, what my background is, what I studied in college, what I write about today. He wants to talk about me, or, rather, he wants me to talk about me. It’s what the man does. He empowers people by getting them to talk about their lives, getting them to communicate to audiences what motivates them, what gets them up in the morning, why they love the things they do. He convinces them that he cares about their stories, staring at them closely, engaged in their every word and coaxing out details. “The story of self,” he calls it. Tell that story well enough, he urges his students, and other people will come to care about these things too. And that’s how change occurs, that’s how “the story of now” develops.

Marshall Ganz’s father was a rabbi; his mother was a teacher. Shortly after World War II, with Rabbi Ganz attached to the Army as a chaplain, the family moved to Germany to minister to the needs of displaced persons. Ganz was only 6 when the family moved to Germany and 8 when they returned to the United States, but, he says, he clearly remembers seeing Holocaust survivors passing through. He still recalls the horror; still has a near-physical reaction when he thinks of all that pain.

A few years later the family moved to Bakersfield, California, at the southern end of the Central Valley, where Rabbi Ganz had found a job ministering to a small Jewish congregation. In 1960 Marshall went east to attend Harvard, but in short order he found himself spending more time on social justice organizing than on his studies. He took a break, went back to California, got involved in Berkeley’s nascent folk music scene. He returned to Harvard, but instead of resuming his studies, he fell in with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and in 1964 was working in McComb, Mississippi, during that year’s famous Freedom Summer. He roomed with Mario Savio.

It was, he recalls, a “joyful struggle,” not in the sense of things always going happily—this was, after all, the year three of his colleagues (James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman) were killed and numerous others subjected to beatings, bombings and other violence—but in the sense that it was so clearly righteous.

In the following years Ganz drifted further away from academia. He dropped out of Harvard, moved to California again, was introduced to Cesar Chavez and began working full time as an organizer. He started to see connections he had not previously seen between the struggles in the Deep South and the struggles of workers in the fields in California. In the spring of 1966 he helped put together the fabled 300-mile march from Delano to Sacramento (the marchers reached the State Capitol on Easter Sunday), which highlighted the harsh conditions faced by the state’s Mexican and Filipino agricultural workers.

Years later, after he parted ways with Chavez—he resigned from the United Farm Workers’ board in 1981, as the movement was fissuring—Ganz continued to work in California. He did more union organizing and community work and later...
helped bring grassroots organizing methods into the state's Democratic Party. Over time he became something of an activist jack-of-all-trades.

In the early 1990s, the middle-aged Ganz returned to Harvard to complete his undergraduate degree ("class of 1964/1992," he says). He stayed on to do graduate work, earning his PhD in 2000, and ended up teaching public narrative and other organizing strategies at the Kennedy School of Government.

Now, half a century after he entered Harvard, Ganz has solidified his reputation as one of the country's leading organizers. To many of his friends, colleagues and students, he is akin to a guru or mentor. Few social justice organizers in America have a better understanding of what campaign strategies work and what don't. Few have a stronger pedigree in the issues they have worked on and in the numbers of new organizers they have taught and nurtured.

Four years ago Ganz decided he wanted to get involved in the embryonic Obama-for-president movement and, in particular, to apply his public narrative techniques as a bedrock part of the presidential strategy. In 2004 Ganz had done some organizing sessions with Howard Dean's campaign, which a number of his ex-students had found their way into. When Kerry emerged as the nominee apparent, Ganz was deeply disappointed by the renewed dominance of what he saw as a bland, passionless "consultocracy." But later that year he was electrified upon hearing a radio broadcast of Obama's "One America" speech to the Democratic Party convention. "I say, 'Holy shit! This guy gets it!' That there needs to be a values struggle here. The heart of the matter is the values that actually move us, that constitute who we are. It was like, 'Ooooh, got it!' This was a voice that could really make a difference in American politics."

Two years later, he was liberally quoting from Obama's convention speech while teaching courses on public narrative and moral leadership. Ganz viewed his classroom as a laboratory. He had recently finished a book, Why David Sometimes Wins, on why Chavez's farmworker movement was so successful in comparison with other unions, like the Teamsters, that had tried and failed to establish a permanent presence in California's fields. Yes, Goliath was more powerful than David; and, yes, if they'd chosen to fight using the expected weaponry of sword and shield, Goliath would have creamed his puny opponent. But by thinking outside the box—grabbing a sling-shot instead of a sword—David had neutralized the big guy's advantage. Chavez and his comrades, outfinanced, outmanned, opposed by business owners and law enforcement, viewed with suspicion by other labor leaders, had worked out a grassroots strategy that connected viscerally with impoverished, dis-enfranchised grape pickers. He had worked out a way to blend stories, to create a narrative binding workers and organizers into one large community.

Identifying your strengths and your opponent's weaknesses, being willing and able to think outside the box, Ganz told his students, were core ingredients of good organization-building.

When Obama declared his candidacy, Ganz approached his friend and Kennedy School colleague Samantha Power, one of Obama's senior foreign policy advisers, and asked her to broker his entry into the campaign. He felt there was room in the Obama candidacy to articulate a difference between the world as it is and the world as it could one day be, to create a situation in which David emerges the victor.

In April 2007 Ganz met with Obama and David Axelrod at Harvard. Intrigued by Ganz's ideas, they invited him to campaign headquarters in Chicago the following month. In June, after a series of meetings, Ganz was charged with the task of setting up a Camp Obama network, intensive community organizing-style training camps in which young people would be taught to tell Obama's story, to spread a message and generate the enthusiasm of a true grassroots movement. Its success was phenomenal, ultimately generating one of the most effective and broad-based presidential campaigns in American history.

While media consultant Axelrod was the numbers brain, the wonk behind the campaign's caucus-and-primary strategy, Ganz was the brains behind the movement-building. No one, including Obama, understood what made the campaign so effective, so good at connecting with young people in particular,

‘He's not a bad man,’ Ganz says of Obama. ‘His policy intent is not bad. But you don't have the opportunity to change history every day.’

so able to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of old loyalties and coalitions, better than Ganz. He understood how to unlock the "prophetic imagination" of youth; the willingness to take the world from where it is to where you want it to be. "The blending of a grassroots organizing capacity with Obama really worked," he argues. "But it wasn't because Obama was telling anybody to do it."

"The first thing we taught was story," explains Ganz. "It was tapping into that moral resource and coupling it with strategy and leadership." Shared values, he told the volunteers, lead to viable relationships and shared commitments. These make it easier to build organizational structure, to generate effective electoral teams, which makes the development of effective strategy possible and makes it more likely that you will attain desired political outcomes.

These days, two years after Obama's historic victory, with the country mired in a politics as polarized and ugly as it has ever been, the question keeps coming up, Where's the energy, the communication methods, the movement passion of the Obama campaign now that he's president? Where has it all gone? One answer is, It's at Harvard, at the Kennedy School of Government, in the person of Marshall Ganz. To the follow-up question, What can Obama do to regain the energy of his golden 2007–08 years? a good starting point for an answer would be to bring Ganz and
President Obama, Ganz says ruefully, seems to be “afraid of people getting out of control.” He needed the organizing base in 2008, but he and his inner circle were quick to dismantle it after the election. Yes, Ganz concedes, they kept Organizing for America, with its access to the vast volunteer databases, alive; but they made a conscious decision to neuter it, so as to placate legislators who were worried about the independent power base it could give Obama. Following a meeting of key members of the transition team, they placed it under the control of the Democratic National Committee. It became, if you like, something of a house pet. Yes, President Obama proposed, and continues to propose, many good policies; but, the community organizing guru concludes, the fire, the passion and the moral clarity were left out of his postelection rhetoric.

Returning to his kitchen table after a brief quest amid the clutter for his eyepieces, Ganz surveys what’s left of candidate Obama’s promise to deliver a cleaner, more uplifting style of politics. After winning in November 2008, Obama and his inner circle wanted to control the terms of the debate rather than be pushed from below by a chaotic, empowered, activist community. They wanted to shift Obama’s leadership style, Ganz believes, from the transformational aura of his candidacy to something different; they wanted him to be a transactional leader, a maker of deals, a compromiser in chief.

“He’s not a bad man,” Ganz says of the president. “His policy intent is not bad. But you don’t have the opportunity to change history every day. The Obama campaign excited the whole world. It created an opportunity to build capacity and do real movement-building.”

In losing sight of that historic opening, and in tamping down the activist energies the campaign had unleashed, President Obama’s inner circle lost a chance to change the country he leads. And then, intellectual polymath that he is, Ganz quotes the medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides. “Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible as opposed to the necessity of the probable.”

“Understanding the sources of strategic capacity can help to explain why the powerful do not always stay powerful,” Ganz wrote in his book on the farmworkers’ movement. “And thus why David sometimes wins. But remaining David can be even more challenging than becoming David in the first place.”

Letters

(continued from page 2)

law as well. If you’re unconscious, you can’t give consent. My editor and I were careful to avoid language implying that Assange was guilty: I simply recited what was known of the accusations. As for Interpol, we do not know how many people Sweden asked it to pursue because only some of the names are public. It may well be, as Lindorff argues, that Assange’s case is being pursued with special vigor because of who he is. That doesn’t tell us, though, whether he is guilty. We’ll just have to wait until the trial.

KATHA POLLITT

Honor Roll 2010

LINCOLN, NEB.
I applaud John Nichols’s “The Progressive Honor Roll of 2010” [Jan. 10/17]—with one exception. Ed Schultz is a fine showman, full of bluster and passion. But “most valuable TV voice”? No way. OK, he’s for the working man. He’s for unions. He’s for real healthcare. Fine. All good. But his voice is shrill, and he paints the political picture in black and white, good guys and evil, much like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck. We don’t need a lefty Glenn Beck. Leading progressive voice? No. That’s Rachel Maddow, hands down. She is rational, she appreciates a good argument, she gives her opponents their due, she lets the arguments fall where they may with ultimate faith in reason.

JOHN WALKER

NEW YORK CITY
I agree that Ed Schultz belongs on the Honor Roll. Schultz brings an anger and a passion to radio/TV lacking in most progressives. He speaks the language of working-class/middle-class wage earners. When I hear him, I believe he is speaking for me. Missing on the honor roll is Paul Krugman, the only true liberal who writes for a mainstream publication.

REBA SHIMANSKY

Dexter, N.Y.
The Honor Roll ignored the person who contributes more to liberal issues than the fun-time show people getting your attention: longtime activist Amy Goodman. She gets interviews with the most recent headline-makers before the “professionals” can get off their butts!

STEWART MACMILLAN

Redmond, Wash.
John Nichols refers to “the single-payer ‘Medicare for All’ approach rejected by the Obama administration.” But Medicare for All and single-payer are two different things. Medicare for All amounts to national health insurance: people purchase health insurance from the state and are treated largely by private sector providers. Single-payer is socialized medicine: the state owns and operates a healthcare system financed by taxes.

PAUL GOODE

Puzzled!

WILMETTE, ILL.
I cast my vote for continuing to reprint the older puzzles by Frank W. Lewis. My wife and I have been doing them together since we met twelve years ago and would miss them terribly if they disappeared.

DAVID FERSTER

Portage, Wis.
When I receive The Nation I turn first to the puzzle! Once I’ve done it I read the magazine. I find the older Frank Lewis puzzles difficult—context seems important. I look forward to the new puzzle master you announced you will be choosing.

SUE BRADLEY

A Confusion of Carolyns

In Katha Pollitt’s January 31 “Subject to Debate” column, it was Carolyn McCarthy (NY-4), not Carolyn Maloney (NY-14), who proposed a bill to ban the sale of large ammunition clips.
Robert Duncan did not know anything about the Modernist poet H.D. in the mid-1930s, when as a teenager in Bakersfield, California, he listened with voluptuous interest to his schoolteacher read H.D’s poem “Heat.”

“Fruit cannot drop through this thick air—fruit cannot fall into heat that presses up and blunts the points of pears and rounds the grapes.”

“The thick air of adolescence, the thick air of Bakersfield,” Duncan later remembered, “the pervasive oppressing atmosphere everywhere of social forces seeking to govern… gave substance to the immediacy of the poem as she read.” The richness of the poem belonged to “a larger life—la vita nuova, Dante had called it.” Duncan’s love for his teacher, Miss Keough, and her ardor for H.D.’s poem illumined the natural relation between beauty, intelligence and vitality. “It was a responsibility to glory that she touched in me.”

Could that recitation of “Heat” have given Duncan an intimation of his affinity with H.D. and his identity as a poet (also committed to free verse, amplified into what he and Charles Olson called “the open field”), homosexual and free-thinker?

Several decades later, his ardor for H.D.’s verse unabated, Duncan sent a birthday poem to the poet. Her reputation had waned since she touched fame as an Imagist in the early twentieth century. *Sea Garden* (1916) was still regarded as her signature work, even though she had written—among other poems, translations, memoirs and novels—*Trilogy* (1946) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961), epics that rivaled Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* and William...
Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. Her austere style was described as “clear,” “frigid,” “pure,” “beautiful” and “inaccessible.” Her work was deemed unstylish by the reigning critics—Randall Jarrell, Louise Bogan, Lionel Trilling, Robert Hillyer—and she was summarily dropped from a renowned anthology, Louis Untermeyer’s *Anthology of British and American Poetry*, when Karl Shapiro and Richard Wilbur joined the editorial team in 1955. Conventional men, Duncan scoffed: “Their name is legion; they swarmed and swarm in competition with one another to establish an idea cut each to his own limitation for the poet.” Legion was the group of demons Jesus cast out of a man and into a herd of pigs.

Duncan recorded this observation in a daybook devoted to H.D. that he began keeping in 1959 and that quickly grew into a wide-ranging study. Published in bits and pieces in small magazines, revised and returned to repeatedly, “The H.D. Book” amassed itself into a volume much as Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet* did, by slow accretion during its author’s life and curatorial handiwork after his death. What editors Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman present to us now is the first comprehensive edition of *The H.D. Book*, a text of nearly 650 pages in which Duncan traces the divagations and derivations of H.D.’s major works, with digressions on Imagism, Pound, Williams, female Modernism, occultism, evolutionary biology and psychoanalysis. Into this eldritch tapestry Duncan weaves patches of poetic autobiography, strands of family history and reflections on his intellectual development.

Duncan begins *The H.D. Book* with his recollection of hearing “Heat.” It’s a mise-en-scène he uses not only to establish an origins myth for his awakening to poetry but also to plant the seeds of several arguments that tendril out through the study. First, poetry, like falling in love, is a matter of affinity, not culture or self-betterment; second, lyric language summons a treasury of lore and wisdom that yields to the willing initiate; and third, the unreal stuff of words, dreams and fantasies lead always and everywhere to action. Artifice draws one to the world, not away from it.

*The H.D. Book* doubles back on itself, re-peating and amplifying, self-criticizing and contesting. It is not a measured retort to men of “rational imagination” like Jarrell, written on the New Critics’ terms. Instead, like W.B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925), which marries automatic writing to occult poetics, or Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), which uses angular lyric criticism to rebuke mannered feminist portraits of Dickinson, *The H.D. Book* is often argued on very personal, idiosyncratic and metaphorical terms. As Boughn and Coleman remark in their introduction, Duncan conceived of thinking “as an explosive release linked to Eros, rather than the traditional notion of a disciplined exposition, Logos, with footnotes and citations.” *The H.D. Book* is, like any of the great works of Modernism, astonishing and maddening by turns. Duncan was 40 when he started keeping the germinal daybook and already a fixture in San Francisco poetry circles and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he taught alongside Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. He had just published his breakthrough book, *The Opening of the Field*, but it was only upon intense engagement with H.D. that he achieved the maturity of his great middle books—*Roots and Branches* and *Bending the Bow*—and the late serial poems of *Ground Work*. His vindication of the master was the crucible out of which his own masterworks were born.

H.D. was born Hilda Doolittle in 1886 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. When she was 9, her family relocated to a suburb of Philadelphia, where her father directed the University of Pennsylvania’s observatory. At 15, she came to know Ezra Pound, a 16-year-old fellow Philadelphian who had already traveled to Europe. He was “immensely sophisticated, immensely superior, immensely rough-and-ready,” H.D. recalled. They both attended Penn and at one point even got engaged, but instead of marrying H.D., Pound lured her to London, where he had already become a literary man-about-town. In 1912 they met in the British Museum tea room over a manuscript of her recent poems. In his excitement Pound scribbled “H.D. Imagiste” at the bottom of the manuscript and mailed it to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*, and thus became the impresario of the first wave of Anglo-American Modernist poetry.

H.D. had known she wanted to be a poet early in life, but she struggled to establish an identity until she left for Europe. As her biographer Helen Carr writes, “H.D. was to say many times that she could not have become a writer if she had not come to Europe.” Further, it was her undertaking of the translation of ancient Greek poetry and drama that allowed her to forge a style as delicate and steely as her temperament—a style that also happened to be original enough to spawn Imagism. Had she not left her own world twice, geographically and linguistically, she would have been remembered as a minor satellite in Pound’s orbit. Instead she became an international figure: not only a famous poet of revolutionary *vers libre* but an iconic free spirit. She was bisexual. She had a child in wedlock but of uncertain paternity. She submitted to psychoanalysis with Freud, wrote feminist pacifist epics and settled in Switzerland.

Women were central to Duncan’s self-invention as a poet. After the memory of H.D. and Miss Keough, another origins tale has him reading aloud from James Joyce’s poems to two female friends on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, where they were undergraduates in 1938, on “one of those radiant days that October brings.” The girls, working-class immigrants, embodied the allure of their respective ancestries: Polish-Jewish Athalie, the descendant of rabbis, and Italian Lili, whom Duncan associated with St. Francis of Assisi. When the campanile bells rang to summon Duncan to ROTC classes, Athalie and Lili urged him to stay with them. “Stay with Joyce,” Lili declared. “Rejoice with Joyce!” Athalie affirmed. This was another awakening: a poetic vocation is a thing apart from the career path and academic accomplishment (but not study or scholarship). Duncan ended up dropping out of Berkeley and getting a discharge by outing himself; he was a lifelong anarchist who set himself against orthodoxy in all its forms, whether mercantile capitalism, the communist state or—most troubling for his friends during the Vietnam War—absolute pacifism.

If responsibility to poetry was at odds with “success,” then poetry for Duncan was a rebellion initiated, nourished and encouraged by women because they were so often denied a chance to succeed. Miss Keough was his “Beatrice,” Athalie and Lili were his “audience,” his “nurses,” but H.D. was something altogether different: a master. Is the sexual agon between men and women so fierce that only a gay man could place a woman in that role? Duncan too speculated: “Men live uneasily with or under the threat of genius in women.”
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Rough Patch

You can tell, by symptoms of neglect, something of his circumstance: the chipped and buckled eaves, deflated jack-o-lantern beside the stoop, an ember under snow, or red ants swarming the sill, crossing a line of cinnamon in some far-flung military action. You can tell, by frying onions, their thick domestic weather, or the grim satisfaction with which his vacuum overlooks a plain of fur and dust. I can tell from a little just what a whole lot means. You treat me like somebody you ain’t never seen.

Hackle stacker, mayfly cripple, and Bloom’s parachute ant crowd an ashtry—to rarify the quality of failure. Mornings, a frowzy Manx kneads his chest with claws unsheathed, thrumming with desire and contempt in equal measure. Every other weekend, he rolls out a court-appointed cot from the closet for his daughter. You can feel, with your fingertips against his metal door, vibrations from the interstate or seismic evidence of Furry Lewis, circa 1928.

DEVIN JOHNSTON

The H.D. Book is at its core a polemic—elevating the female and the nonconformist and the heterodox against the institutions of men. One of these institutions was literature. For Duncan, English department literature was the ossification of a living, vital recording impulse in the same way that the church was the ossification of a living, vital religious impulse. This was no metaphor. Duncan grew up in a family of West Coast Theosophists, as far from the East Coast establishment as one could get. Chafing under the formalist reign of New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom, he was alert to their tribal affinities. “Tribal” was no metaphor for Duncan either: the New Critics really were the descendants of “those ministers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, holding out against the magic of poetry as once they had held out—by burning or ridicule—against the magic-religion of the witch-cults.” In “Why Critics Don’t Go Mad,” a tribute to Brooks’s commentary on John Milton, Ransom wrote of his kinship with Brooks: “The fact is that Brooks and I were about as alike as two peas from the same pod in respect to our native region, our stock (we were sons of ministers of the same faith, and equally had theology in our blood), the kind of homes we lived in, the kind of small towns.” When Duncan quotes Dudley Fitts or Randall Jarrell on H.D.—“more than a little silly,” “an anarchonism”—he unleashes a ferocious counter-magic on them. “That company”—T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens—belong to the realm of the “rational imagination.” They were English department gentility, Duncan claimed, who pandered to a civic ideal of self-betterment that lacked visionary scope.

In his fervor Duncan could be monomaniacal, parochial and dead wrong. Who now would deem Stevens—whose “Sunday Morning” is a sublime meditation on death and beauty, his “Ideas of Order at Key West” a cri de coeur, his “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” a gnomic riddle—a mere rationalist? Though it is late to be arguing (still) about the merits of Williams versus Eliot, there are moments of insight in Duncan’s portrait of the rivalry. If you don’t share Duncan’s disdain for Eliot’s sophisticated images, such as Prufrock’s “When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table,” you might find more persuasive his argument that The Waste Land was burdened by “period charade”: “The fame of the poet itself had triumphed over the pain of the poem.” In his sympathetic reading of Moore’s “He Digesteth Harde Yron” he locates the poet she might have been if she had been less “exemplary.” Ransom wrote in “Criticism, Inc.” (not an ironic title): “The critic should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre.” The H.D. Book takes a ferocious stand against this presumption of trickery, and Duncan’s enmity would exist even if Ransom had not withdrawn Duncan’s great poem “African Elegy” from publication at Kenyon Review after his pioneering essay, “The Homosexual in Society,” published in Dwight Macdonald’s magazine Politics in 1944, caused a seismic disturbance in literary circles.

Duncan came to recognize the futility of his anger: “Jarrell and Louise Bogan were most right in their recognition that H.D. was not for them.” The task, then, was not to refute the charges of silliness and anarchonism but to delve into the meaning of those terms and justify their appeal to the great poet. For Duncan, the great poet endeavors to unify the scattered epiphanies of daily experience and give them meaning within the context of myths, gods, Homer, Dante, Whitman—the whole human epic. In order to rehabilitate anarchonism, Duncan relies on a counterintuitive understanding of reality—or “the real.” What is the real, and is fiction not real? Is H.D.’s world less or more real than Eliot’s because rather than modern social types (Sweeney, Prufrock, etherized patients), she deploys archetypes and allegories (Helen of Troy, Christ)? Is Shakespeare’s Bohemia not “real”? What of Yeats’s Gyre, Jean Cocteau’s Hell, or Emily Dickinson’s Loaded Gun? Are Christianity and the Kabala “real”? In H.D.’s children’s book, The Hedgehog (1936), the 6-year-old narrator thinks, “Growing up and last year’s shoes that didn’t fit this year—these were things that were part of a dream, not part of reality. Reality was the Erlking and the moonlight on Bett’s room wall.” The poet, in order to find the real, must look under the surface of the world to its hidden core of perdurance. The figure for one’s pantheon of masters is not, properly, a “canon,” as it is in English departments. It is, per the ancient tarot pack, an arcana.
stream back into his genesis as a poet:

The soul, my mother’s sister, my Aunt Fay, told me years later, was like a swarm of bees, and, at night, certain entities of that swarm left the body and went to feed in fields of helium. ... Fate, faith, feign, and fair, we find, following the winding associations of fay, fey, and fairy, in the Oxford English Dictionary, are closely related. From many roots, words gathered into one stem of meaning, confused into a collective suggestion. There is fay, too, from old Teutonic ‘fôgjan, to join, to fix.’

Hence, too, to an embrace of “fairy” as in queer, effeminate.

The Duncan family’s enthusiasm for the Theosophist Madame Blavatsky was contemporaneous with her association with Yeats when he was in his early 20s. Yeats is a touchstone for Duncan. Through his friendship with Pound, Yeats became part of an Imagist circle where his Helen—the offspring of “Leda and the Swan”—mingled with H.D.’s Helen, and his membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a group of occultists active in turn-of-the-century Britain, paralleled her obsession with the ancient temple complex at Karnak, Egypt. Blavatsky’s counterculturalism was of a kind with the poets’: Yeats believed that poetry had “a secret tradition and doctrine”; H.D. believed “we are the keepers of the secret.”

The arcane was not limited to the supernatural; after Freud, the natural was arcane too. H.D. wrote a memoir of her sessions with Freud, and averred that he had thought of psychoanalysis as a kind of religion. Despite this, his disavowal of the “oceanic feeling” of limitlessness induced by religion marks him as a man of science, not poetry. One of The H.D. Book’s most rewarding tangents is when Duncan criticizes Freud for his work of disenchantment, The Future of an Illusion: “The man who would present himself without the dimensions of dream and fantasy, much less the experience of illusion and error, who would render the true from the false by voiding the fictional and the doubtful, diminishes the human experience.” Duncan speculated that Freud repressed his own infant pleasure in fairy tales when he witnessed his father, who was from Moravia, chiding his nanny, who was overheard imparting Catholic nonsense to the child.

H.D. was raised in a pacifist Pennsylvania Moravian sect, her birthplace was Bethle-
Duncan called H.D.'s war poem *Trilogy* the story of ‘the evolution of forms in which life survives.’

Still a new marvel of excavated meanings and usages in Duncan’s formative years—and, of course, to Freud:

Like the detective hero of the murder mystery which was contemporary in its rise with psychoanalysis and the O.E.D., Freud reads in the dreams and life stories told by his patients searching for clues to a prehistory or metaphoristory leading to the disclosure of some past event that will make clear what really happened, parallel with the solution that satisfies the form of the popular mystery novel. So, in the Theosophic mystery, the traumas of Hyperborea or of Atlantis come as disclosures of shaping forces in our own lives—they are still with us.

The past is still with us, in the reptile’s memory—astounding, perishing, derived always from an evolution of possible forms, survivable. Was this 1961 or 2003? The poet risks blindness, like Steichorus, if she does not ask right now, in 2011, whether “freedom, Christianity, democracy” are still in Egypt while we grasp at eidolons.

The H.D. Book is, at bottom, a spell book. I admit that very few readers will concur with its supernatural assumptions and its purist tenets. I also think that it is a fierce contribution to the Western poetic palimpsest. As a testimony to poetic vocation, it could not be clearer, and in these confusing times a young poet could use the encouragement: to maintain her education—with or without the aid of a degree program (Duncan’s apprenticeship to H.D. was purely textual)—and to maintain a fine contrarianism:

After the excitement in the authenticity of masterpiece(s), having resistant individuality and a demanding skill, I have come to see such works not as the achievement of inventors or masters or diluters or starters of crazes, as Pound would have us classify writers in his *ABC of Reading*—not as objects of a culture, embodying original sensibilities, but as events in another dimension, a field of meanings in which consciousness was in process; where I saw psyche and spirit, as I had come thru psycho and spirit, I saw psyche and spirit. The H.D. Book as an apologia for the imagination comes down to its case for the truth of Helen in Egypt. A real person can have a double, an eidolon, through the collective mind (fame); the reverse is also true, wherein an eidolon, a mythical or fictional character, can become real. Everything our modern civilization is staked on is a matter of imagination: money, career, literature, “the public,” “are all realms that men in their phantasies invest with reality,” Duncan writes. They are all eidolons, and yet they lead, Duncan argues, to actions with consequences—the real as defined by the irreducible: bloodshed. So it was with all the hairs on my head rising that I read, toward the end of Duncan’s epic commentary:

Is that contrarianism, or is it faith? For Duncan, as for all serious poets, there may be no difference.
Viewing Conditions

by AKIVA GOTTLIEB

Not long ago, I received a package from a person I have never met. Inside I found no message—only the initials “JLG” scrawled on a DVD-R, and though I’m no die-hard Godardian, I recognized the object as a totem designed to set my small-town cinephile’s heart aflutter. Jean-Luc Godard’s newest polyglot provocation, Film Socialisme, had recently premiered at the Cannes Film Festival with what the director called “Navajo subtitling”: the French, Spanish, Afrikaans, German, Russian and Hebrew dialogue wasn’t so much translated as chiseled into emphatic bullet points and invented compound words. Convinced that the potentially final feature from the late twentieth century’s most influential auteur deserved a more lucid presentation, one film critic in Berlin sweated out a more scrupulous set of English subtitles, and another in Texas worked to preserve the stereo separation on Godard’s typically layered soundtrack. Responding to a bulletin on a social networking site announcing the availability on DVD of their improved version of Film Socialisme, I sent out an e-mail, and in lieu of a reply I received a FedEx. I’m not the only beneficiary: at some point I’m supposed to forward the disc to a guy in Nebraska. Like I said, film socialism.

This low-stakes conspiracy of shared passion shouldn’t ruffle Godard, an artist so opposed in spirit to the idea of intellectual property that he recently donated 1,000 euros toward the defense of an accused Internet pirate. (His French distributor uploaded an unsubtitled version of Film Socialisme online earlier this year.) Presumably each of my faceless co-conspirators would have shelled out $20 to see the movie projected at the New York Film Festival, had we not been trapped in the hinterlands by the exigencies of fate. This is all to say that Susan Sontag, consummate Manhattanite, had it wrong in her 1996 essay “The Decay of Cinema”: “Perhaps it is not cinema that has ended but only cinephilia.” If the ardor of film culture were dead, movie piracy wouldn’t matter. I imagine that if Sontag had been exiled to Peoria after developing a taste for Bela Tarr, she would have found a way back to Satantango through sheer force of will, some well-connected friends or a high-speed wireless setup.

Sontag’s high-cultural lament wasn’t just imprecise but exactly backward. As Jonathan Rosenbaum argues, without undue nostalgia, in Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia—a scattershot, free-associational collection of position papers, eulogies, knocks at the Bush administration and reconsiderations of noncanonical films, all previously published elsewhere—the most obvious reason why the golden age of filmgoing feels long past is that no one can quite agree what film means anymore. “It’s a central aspect of our alienated relation to language that when someone says ‘I just saw a film,’ we don’t know whether this person saw something on a large screen with hundreds of other people or alone on a laptop—or whether he or she saw was on film, video, or DVD, regardless of where and how it was seen.”

This is not a groundbreaking or sophisticated argument. The question “Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?” has troubled every chin-stroking film theorist since Andre Bazin, and a vocal legion of mostly young Internet-based cinephiles have pragmatically asserted that laptops will serve as the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Cinémathèque Française. In this case, what emboldens this inquiry is not the message but the messenger. The 67-year-old Rosenbaum, recently retired after twenty years as the weekly critic at the Chicago Reader, was during that same period the most discriminating, confrontational, iconoclastic and respected American film reviewer writing under a weekly deadline for a mainstream readership. He’s a trusted voice and an elder statesman, and I can’t think of a more judicious arbiter of what young movie obsessives should be able to sacrifice in the name of cinephilia.

With limited editorial interference at the Reader, Rosenbaum seized an opportunity to subvert crass commercialism by simply devoting more attention to alternative fare than to the week’s prepackaged “important” movies. But in Rosenbaum’s dialectic, alternative doesn’t necessarily mean independent, and polemic takes precedence over literary style. The week Saving Private Ryan opened, Rosenbaum denounced its apparent patriotic warmongering and devoted most of his review to a four-star consecration of Joe Dante’s Small Soldiers, “a trenchant satire masquerading as a summer kids’ movie that’s rude enough to suggest that the emotions and fancies underlying the make-believe war games boys like to play are not so different from the sentiments and fabrications underlying real wars.” Counterpoint is Rosenbaum’s métier; his personal film canons, as compiled and developed in his books Movie Wars and Essential Cinema, were first drafted in opposition to the American Film Institute’s staid and parochial “100 Years…100 Movies” list. It was no surprise that upon Ingmar Bergman’s death, the New York Times turned to Rosenbaum for an unsentimental dissenting opinion on the auteur’s body of work.

Ever focused on the materiality of the medium and the vagaries of the marketplace, Rosenbaum is not merely a leftist but a globalist: if names like Abbas Kiarostami, Jia Zhangke or Ousmane Sembene mean anything to you, it’s likely you have Rosenbaum to thank. His interest in the economics of distribution and the xenophobia of the “media-industrial complex,” not to mention his well-argued distaste for the work of Woody Allen, likely derives from his vantage point as a Second City critic; while the best films of the international festival crop used to be guaranteed weeklong runs in New York City, those films migrate to the proverbial “other markets” only if they can turn a profit. Chicago isn’t Peoria, but it isn’t far away.

An emphasis on viewing conditions and historicity is evident in Rosenbaum’s earliest writings: “Subjectivity in critical writing is never something to be avoided—to try to do so is merely to make one’s self the passive victim of its complex operations—but always something to be defined and accounted for.” Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia obliges with an ambitious essay about the effects of marijuana on the movies, an update of an earlier piece published in 1985 in High Times. Yes, dope invigorated the brain waves of certain late-60s auteurs, and revolutionized criticism as well; many remember Andrew Sarris’s initial dismissal of 2001: A Space Odyssey as “a thoroughly uninteresting failure” and his subsequent, comparably rapturous revisiting of the film “under the influence of a smoked substance...somewhat stronger and more authentic than oregano.” But for Rosenbaum

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the sociological inquiry leads elsewhere. He tracks “The Movie as Trip” from a tribally shared collective pastime—exemplified by the 1968 release of *Yellow Submarine*—to the “more private and individualized experience in the eighties and early nineties...as grass smoking gradually returned to the living room, bedroom, and bathroom.” The stoner movies became more insular and insular. “Compare 2010 to 2001, *The Cotton Club* to *Singin’ in the Rain*, *Dune* to *Forbidden Planet*, *Gimme Shelter* to *Woodstock*: in each case the social context becomes narrower while the individual head-trip looms larger.”

Though his marijuana research sounds unempirical, Rosenbaum is an absolute historical materialist. While championing a low-budget film, he’s as likely to emphasize the advertising budget of a contemporaneous mainstream movie as to single out the qualities of an actor’s performance. Economics forms an element of style, and in Rosenbaum reviews such considerations regularly stray from what’s on the screen. Every film critic is the target of studio advertising, and Rosenbaum (who never hesitates to judge the complacency of “most critics”) regularly acknowledges its corrosive effect. Responding to an aggressive and tasteless ad campaign for the morbid jigsaw puzzle *21 Grams* (2003), he wrote: “I assume that if Focus Features were also capable of determining and then inserting the exact moments of our own deaths inside an inflated, transparent plastic bag, complete with a tie-in to the title of their film, they’d be sending that along to us members of the press as well, and probably gift-wrapping it in the bargain.”

Paradoxically, he’s a movie formalist who doesn’t worship cinema as an independent entity; film, history, politics and commerce are impossible to separate, and film criticism ideally finds ways to enumerate the links. “I can’t see much purpose,” he wrote, “in commemorating movies whose prime aim seems to be to make me forget the world outside the theater.” He turned a week-of-release review of *The Flintstones* (1994) into a wide-ranging disquisition on “the moral and philosophical chaos lying at the heart of such light entertainment,” beginning with the Société Film d’Art in 1908 France. He treats no piece of outside information as irrelevant.

Just because I haven’t found a Rosenbaum review in which he lays out for the reader, in scrupulous detail, how much money he makes and how he spends it does not mean such a review does not exist.

There’s an element of intellectual biography to everything Rosenbaum writes. (A bona fide autobiography, *Moving Places*, was published in 1980 and is out of print.) Born into cinephilia as the son and grandson of Jewish film exhibitors in northwestern Alabama, he saw a half-dozen movies per week until leaving for boarding school in Vermont in 1959. Ten years later, after a short stint in graduate school, he moved to Paris, surrendered to a heady swirl of kino-lust and Marxism and began contributing pieces to *The Village Voice* and *Film Comment*. (The young man’s take on *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be found somewhere in the *Voice* archives.) An apprentice with unusually discerning tastes, the kid got around. He worked as an assistant to Jacques Tati, appeared as an extra for Robert Bresson and adapted a J.G. Ballard novel into a screenplay that he unsuccessfully shopped to Susan Sontag.

It’s Rosenbaum’s Southern childhood as much as his Gallic sophistication that informs his career-long critique of American exceptionalism, and accounts for much of his best writing. His understanding of John Ford’s early masterpiece *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953) is bound up in his own region-specific memory. Judge Priest’s patronizing courtroom treatment of U.S. Grant Woodford, a young black banjo player wrongly accused of raping a white girl, reminds Rosenbaum of the way “my grandfather once cussed out a black male servant who worked for him when he discovered that he’d been duped by a loan shark—treating him in the most demeaning way possible, as if he were a stupid child, and then calling up the loan shark with threats and more abuse in order to extricate the servant from his highly exploitative debts.” Rosenbaum digs even deeper into the memory trove when reviewing a film he hates; his evisceration of the simple-minded and revisionist civil rights fantasy *Mississippi Burning* (1988) is a master class in the employment of personal rage and historical consciousness in popular criticism.

Rosenbaum’s sense of place is intact, even if he has a new home. “I live on the internet,” he has said elsewhere. In his book he explains that “Part of our problem in assessing our new conditions is a bad habit of often assuming by reflex that they’re either bad or good—which is about as futile as arriving at such a simplistic conclusion about globalization.” He’s not an evangelist, in other words, for the Internet’s modes of exchange, but he seems perfectly willing to engage with the experiment. For one thing, he freely admits to downloading undistributed (and out-of-print) movies. His no-frills personal website serves as a repository for old reviews and occasional notes, and though he hasn’t migrated to blogging like some of his estimable peers, Rosenbaum periodically posts comments on other blogs, lending the format some legitimacy by his mere presence. Rosenbaum is so unpretentious a participant in the web’s tribal community that, until recently, one could find brand-new Rosenbaum columns on something called DVDBeaver.com. He also indulges the web’s appetite for full disclosure: he now admits that a fawning review of his *Moving Places*, published in *Film Comment* by an unknown hack named Nancy Rothstein, was his handiwork, written with “mercenary, or at least self-promotional” motives. (A common practice, he assures us, that had his editor’s full support.)

The final pages of *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia* discuss Cal Arts professor Thom Andersen’s *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, a superlative three-hour essay film that seems to have internalized all of Rosenbaum’s political and formal concerns. Because Andersen’s movie, a class-conscious social history of Southern California as well as a radical act of cinephilia, is composed almost entirely of unlicensed clips from hundreds of movies that use the city as a backdrop, it can never be officially released on DVD. I was born and raised in Los Angeles—no one who sits through Andersen’s documentary can ever call it “LA” again—and this breathtaking “city symphony in reverse” upsets so many of my own faulty sociological assumptions, uncovered so many neglected and marginalized spaces, that a hand seemed to be reaching out beyond the screen to tear the veil from my eyes. The international marketplace will continue to trivialize what movies (and criticism) can do, but Rosenbaum and Andersen recognize that any screen, no matter the size, can sharpen our focus.
Things as They Are

by STUART KLIWANS

See the beauty in everything, Mija’s poetry teacher has told her; and so, when she discovers apricots lying along a footpath, she imagines they were ready to start their next lives and hurled themselves to the ground. How pleasant it is to think of suicide this way, as something sweet and fecund. It’s the kind of idea that Mija has been straining for, and not just because she has taken it into her head, late in life, to learn to write poetry. Inescapably, though by no fault of her own, she is involved in the death of a girl who drowned herself.

Mija has journeyed to this farmland outside her provincial Korean city to speak with the girl’s mother. But the idea about the apricots diverts her so much, and she feels so relieved to have thought of it, that the purpose of the trip seems to slip her mind. Words do, too, nowadays. The doctors say it’s Alzheimer’s; and so, for the moment, nothing is more important to Mija than to pause in the shade and write down her line of verse, using the notebook she carries in her wide-mouthed woven handbag.

One of the more conspicuous props in Lee Chang-dong’s Poetry, that bag might have struck you as being less of a purse than a basket, if Mija’s manner didn’t wrap it in an air of old-fashioned gentility—a some-

what deceptive air, as it happens. By the time you get to the apricot scene, you know that even though Mija habitually dolls up in flouency, soft-colored outfits with long skirts and lacy collars, then tops herself with a broad-brimmed summer hat, she makes ends meet at age 66 by laboring as a housemaid and homecare attendant. She strips off her ladylike street clothes to do laundry, scrub floors, wipe the bottom of an elderly stroke victim and give him his bath; and then she trots back to her little apartment to labor some more, cooking and cleaning for her teenage grandson. These struggles cannot invalidate the determination of a slight, still pretty woman to carry on uncomplainingly with a traditional, feminine smile (and the occasional muttered sarcasm); but neither do they allow her to kid herself for long. See the beauty in everything, Mija’s teacher has said; but he has also urged her to look at things as they are, and given what she knows about life, she does not understand how she can do both. By the time she has reached the dead girl’s mother and braved a conversation, the line evoking sweet, purposeful suicide has failed one of its tests.

You may judge the fullness of Poetry, a film that is beautiful and truthful alike, by the fact that just these few moments of it can yield so much—and I haven’t even touched on the narrative core of this scene. Here, as everywhere else in the movie, you find an abundance of drama, or perhaps (more precisely) catastrophe. Lee has stuffed the plot of this quiet, meditative film with rape, theft, extortion, corruption, violent death, borderline prostitution and (hanging over it all) the unthinking arrogance of men toward women—a longer list of crimes than you’ll find even in Im Sang-soo’s The Housemaid (another noteworthy recent release from Korea), though without Im’s cheerful grotesquerie. Lee, who prefers to look at things as they are, constructs a deliberately prosaic world where Mija’s employer can make a grand gesture out of tipping her the equivalent of nine bucks, and the life of a girl known as Agnes can be priced at $27,000, subject to negotiation and fees.

If powerless Mija, continually overburdened and condescended to, were to plot to get justice in this world, all the while keeping her mask of meekness in place, she would end up as a kind of Korean Pirate Jenny—and so she does. But the source of Poetry’s fullness lies in Mija’s refusal to stop at justice. As she faces the inevitable slipping away of everything—her meager income, her loutish grandson, her words, her life, the life of a girl she never knew—she resolutely searches for a beauty that is dependable and can endure.

I have seen Poetry twice—once at the 2010 New York Film Festival, where everyone seemed to think it the finest selection on the slate, and once as I prepared to write this column and give the film the lengthier consideration it demands. Nothing much changed between those two viewings, except that my admiration for Yun Jung-hee as Mija deepened into awe.

Needless to say, Yun inhabits Mija. The critical issue is the way Yun inhabits Mija’s own performance in life, which might be described as erratic. Sometimes Mija fulfills social conventions—giggling on cue at a token compliment, for example, with a modest evasion of the other person’s eyes. Just as often, though, she loses track of her assigned role: forgetting all but the merest pretense of sweet good manners as she dares the registrar at the cultural center to keep her out of the poetry class; or wandering abstractedly out of a meeting—right out of the building, in fact—to gaze with outthrust head and slumped shoulders at an irrelevancy; or flailing about on the street, with little hops from foot to foot as she makes her grandson play badminton with her, to get the exercise the doctors say she needs.
Of course, there’s a great tradition in Asian cinema of exposing the gap between a woman’s feelings and the ritualized behavior expected of her. (To cite just one example, think of Naruse’s *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs.*) Part of what makes Yun’s performance in *Poetry* so stunning, though, is that she plays Mija as if there were no gap. Yun achieves her deepest moment of pathos, perhaps, in a monologue delivered in the poetry class, where she instills just one drop of loss and sadness into a recollection of getting dressed up prettily at age 3. (It’s Mija’s happiest memory.) Yun saves her biggest fortissimo for a scene with Mija’s grandson, where her raised voice and frantic gestures crash uselessly against the young man’s disrespectful silence. And when the moment comes to reveal a lighter, unsuspected side to Mija, Yun (who has appeared in more than 300 films) rounds out the character by abruptly singing a sockeroo karaoke number. From these examples, you can see the variety of resources Yun brings to her job—but, more important, you may understand how consistently she uses them, creating a character in whom vanity is indistinguishable from lifelong ideals; and ideals can either reinforce decorum or shatter it, as if these supposedly separate elements were her limbs, her breath, her heartbeat.

It is a classic performance—and it had better be, because Lee makes Mija the focal point of most of his shots and every scene. And yet the visual style of his style, though, its motifs run through the film’s fatai river—never forces Mija on you and seldom isolates her. Shown often in middle-distance and long shots, she is usually seen as part of the life of a classroom, a grocery store, a neighborhood street, a restaurant gathering. You might say that Lee the director gets out of the way of Lee the screenplay writer. For all the self-effacement of his style, though, its motifs run through the film as insistently as—again—that river. Water is everywhere in the picture; at the scene of the girl’s death, in the stroke victim’s apartment (where it eventually makes things dirtier rather than cleaner), in the shower (where Mija at last breaks down and weeps), in the cloudburst that accompanies Mija’s trip to the country. Stopping at the place where the corpse was discovered, she opens her notebook to try to write something, and we see a close-up of the blank page as it begins to receive marks—not from her pen, but from the raindrops spattering down.

Nature, weeping, writes when Mija can’t. I suppose some viewers will dismiss this image as a pathetic fallacy (though whether that concept is at all germane to Korean poetry, I don’t know). But I can tell you that the rain’s writing, unlike the line about the apricots, is true to Mija’s experience, true to the horror of what happened to the girl, and utterly beautiful. I hope I’m not giving away too much when I say that Mija, who is too strong to allow the rain to do her work for her, finds her own way to write at the end. You should see how. *Poetry* will open on February 11.

Finally, a family that really is unhappy in its own way. Patricia is the lank-haired, hollow-eyed, perpetually furious mother; Sabina, the nubile daughter dressed at all hours in a nightgown and a manipulative air; Julián, her pouty brother with the terrible temper and quick fists; Alfredo, the mild son who grooms himself so carefully to look normal. The father of this brood (or their leader, as they sometimes call him) has just dropped dead, amid a pool of vomited blood, at the shopping mall, where he liked to stare at the mannequins. Now the family finds itself without support in its ramshackle, sunless apartment in a Mexico City housing project.

If the unhappiness does not yet sound distinctive, then consider that “support,” in Jorge Michel Grau’s *We Are What We Are*, means something different from what it would in the average cinematic excursion into urban poverty. The family is about to go hungry, yes; but the “something” the leader was supposed to bring back to feed them might have been a vagrant, a homeless child from under the highway, an incalculable taxi driver or (to Mom’s disgust) one of the streetwalkers old Dad used to find so savory.

A test for the critical faculties as much as the gag reflexes, *We Are What We Are* plays the fiendish trick of behaving like a genre movie while dispensing with the hints of allegory that usually justify art-house thrillers. Grau does not propose that the poorer margins of society in Mexico City (very ample “margins” they are, too) resemble a horror movie where desperate people feed off one another. He simply shows people feeding off one another in Mexico City, as if the horror movie were a neorealist drama. *We Are What We Are?* That might be the expository motto not just for the story’s characters but for its events.

Directed with the brio of an old-style Wes Craven shocker, *We Are What We Are* roams with a fevered spirit but clear eyes through the markets, streets, subways and even discos of the city. But the center of the movie, and its deepest horror, remains at home, where the emotional interplay among mother, sister and brothers rivals the sharpness of teeth sinking into human flesh. It will be released on February 18 at the IFC Center in New York and on demand on IFC Midnight video.

Just when I thought American pop filmmaking was dead, *The Dilemma* slipped into theaters in the depths of January. Directed by Ron Howard with his usual high-gloss efficiency, written by Allan Loeb with deference to most (though not all) commercial imperatives, and marketed by Universal as if it were just another comedy of love and misbehavior between aging frat boys, *The Dilemma* nevertheless turns out to have a touch of real, disquieting life.

In Chicago, the movie city where regular guys live, two friends who are regular enough to be Vince Vaughn and Kevin James devote their working lives to the sexual mystique of muscle cars. But what do these men really have under the hood? It seems that James, nervous enough for someone half his weight, must not have been satisfying his wife (Winona Ryder); while the towering, slack-bellied and liquid-tongued Vaughn reacts to the prospect of a lifetime with Jennifer Connelly (an appealing proposition to most regular guys) by going into a film-length anxiety attack. He has just learned, at 40, that the intimate relationships of grown-ups are not always what they seem and cannot always be easily moralized.

Some of this is played for laughs; a surprising proportion of it is not. And the biggest surprise of all is that after *The Dilemma* has announced its themes of friendship, honesty and trust—they’re not just written into the dialogue but highlighted in yellow marker—it has something unspoken left to say.

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Puzzle No. 1620
FRANK W. LEWIS

ACROSS
1 What happens with landing patterns might be a matter of stop and go. (7,6)
9 In the main, it should be jolly. (5)
10 What one of the mates saves up before a hitch could show either end of the twist on a painter. (9)
11 Oriental flower with a point on either side. (7)
12 The table is most upset with a worker being noisy or vulgar. (7)
13 It’s soul-shattering when one is inside—it might make one either a saint or a king. (5)
14 What one might hit or deliver in disguise. (4,5)
16 Well-groomed flocks, or those that took care of them? (9)
18 Use foil to surround something—in case it’s hot, one can handle it! (5)
19 One might get on in a month or so like 13, perhaps. (7)
21 Satisfied with what’s inside? (7)
22 Left at sea in almost all comedy when properly behaved. (9)
23 The current amount to the French might be enough. (5)
24 One might take a stopwatch to the track workout to do it, but with 1 down it naturally follows. (3,3,4,3)

DOWN
1 Reputed woman-chasers that might cause some concern. (5,5,4)
2 Argonauts might make a dash for some. (9)
3 Distant foreign seas, but they grow still. (7)
4 Break up a partnership in metals, copper being one of them. (3,2)
5 Smith’s muscles were comparable, somewhat like press unions. (4,5)
6 Save the better half of 1 down’s object of pursuit. (7)
7 Female graduate from Queensland? (5)
8 Polly has been asked to do it. (3,3,6,2)
14 Regular end to a district movement, perhaps. (9)
15 Traditional host. (9)
17 Being partly rich, or money-making, might get into the blood. (7)
18 Hot-dogs and beer at the game, served with flourish. (7)
20 In short, Tom, Dick or Harry. (5)
21 Acted like a would-be soldier. (5)

This puzzle originally appeared in the February 21, 1976, issue.
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