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Letters

Suffer the Little Puffins

ATLANTA
To perpetuate Tony Kushner’s Puffin Prize, fondness for funny fowl and tilt toward alliteration, he might endow a Distinguished Dodo lectureship. Congratulations on being a creative citizen! [“On Puffins and Presidents,” Jan. 30].
Seth Foldy

New England’s PB: Beats Leaf-Peeping!

ROYALSTON, Mass.
I read Gabriel Hetland’s “Grassroots Democracy in Venezuela” [Jan. 30] with a sense of déjà vu. Here in New England, we’ve been practicing participatory budgeting (PB) for nearly 400 years. We call it “town meeting.” In most New England towns, residents assemble once a year to vote on the budget—everything from cemetery care and streetlights to asphalt, senior housing and snow removal. So the true origin of PB is up here in the Northeast. It is ironic that Milwaukee, Chicago and Oakland, among other cities discussed by Hetland, must learn about PB from Venezuela rather than from US states and towns. I encourage those in the US PB movement to save the intercontinental airfare and head to New England in the spring. Town meeting is more entertaining than the autumn leaves, and we could sure use the tourist revenue!
Aaron Ellison

Schools for the Poor Are Poor Schools

PHILADELPHIA
There is no doubt that President Obama made a serious mistake when he chose Arne Duncan over Linda Darling-Hammond to be his education secretary. Unlike Duncan, who arrived late to the conclusion that No Child Left Behind is a “broken” law, Darling-Hammond always knew it and correctly analyzes its failures in “Redlining Our Schools” [Jan. 30].

Except for the stipulation that teachers must be highly prepared and qualified, there is little to salvage from the disastrous NCLB. Congress would be wise to take Darling-Hammond’s suggestions, unless it is committed to the deconstruction and privatization of our public schools. That would indeed be an American tragedy.
Gloria C. Endres

Morristown, N.J.
Hooray for Linda Darling-Hammond blowing the whistle on the Obama administration’s misguided policies to turn around “failing schools.” The proposition that schools that educate only children from very poor families can be transformed by firing the principal and most of the teachers aims at the wrong target.

That said, progressives err in acting like they know how to solve the problem of deep poverty. Of course we need a stronger safety net and more effective jobs and housing programs, as Darling-Hammond notes. But stick to the issue: what to do with “poverty only” schools. Concentrated poverty is the problem. Public schools are the only institutions certain to touch the lives of very poor children. So, stop with the jobs and housing suggestions and focus on what needs to change with educational policies and practices.

Children from poor families begin kindergarten without the vocabulary, general knowledge and familiarity with print they need to begin to read. This is the tragic gap that is rarely narrowed, which means that most poor children are not strong readers by third grade. We know that if they are not up to grade level by age 9 or 10, their chances of catching up are only around 10 percent.

The shame of federal policy is that it fails to concentrate on the kindergarten gap. President Obama campaigned with the right ideas but failed to follow through with what are proven practices:

§ start early with excellent preschool
§ concentrate on intensified literacy instruction in the primary grades and surround students with books, words, ideas, stories
§ spend more time with kids who struggle, check progress frequently

letters@thenation.com

(continued on page 26)
The Syrian Dilemma

The term “Arab Spring” never accurately conveyed the grim conditions of protest in Syria, even before last year’s mostly peaceful demonstrations turned increasingly to armed resistance in response to brutal repression by the government of Bashar al-Assad. But now—a killing rate so high that human rights observers can give only rough estimates, after protracted government bombardment of Homs and with reports of growing arms supplies to the resistance from neighboring Lebanon and Iraq—the crisis has become truly ominous. As if that isn’t bad enough, the failure of the Arab League’s observer mission, followed by the Russian and Chinese veto of the United Nations Security Council resolution calling for a transitional government and elections, seems to have stymied diplomatic solutions.

Up to now, the Obama administration has rightly deferred to regional actors. But the frustration so far of regional and UN diplomacy poses the question, Where should US policy go from here? Not surprisingly, Senator John McCain and other neoconservatives have called for the United States to arm and lend logistical support to the Free Syrian Army. So have some former British officials and other powers infuriated Russia, China and their resistance to Security Council measures on Syria.

The administration is in a difficult position: there are no good options for stopping the violence and bringing an end to the Assad regime. Since Syria is so intertwined with its neighbors, the White House needs a broad regional policy to help contain the crisis, complemented by a longer-term strategy of encouraging democracy. Whether Washington likes it or not, Russia holds one of the keys to such a strategy, for only Moscow has the leverage and influence with Damascus to persuade Assad to constrain the violence and allow a democratic transition.

The State Department has blamed the Assad regime and its European and Arab allies—perhaps joined by Qaeda-affiliated Sunni jihadists—supporting the rebels. Because of the unspeakable horrors of a full-scale civil war, the administration should proceed with great caution. Some who favor arming the opposition cite last year’s Libyan intervention as a positive example. Not only does the continuing chaos in Libya call such claims into question; the Syrian crisis is vastly different from Libya’s. A protracted war in Syria would be almost impossible to contain, and would thus destabilize Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel and Iraq, setting democratization back decades. The Libyan intervention also set a disastrous diplomatic precedent: by violating the narrowly tailored UN resolution and openly fighting for regime change, the Western powers infuriated Russia, China and other countries, sowing the seeds of their mistrust and their resistance to Security Council measures on Syria.

The administration must put aside its frustrations and its European and Arab allies—perhaps joined by Qaeda-affiliated Sunni jihadists—supporting the rebels. Because of the unspeakable horrors of a full-scale civil war, the administration should proceed with great caution. Some who favor arming the opposition cite last year’s Libyan intervention as a positive example. Not only does the continuing chaos in Libya call such claims into question; the Syrian crisis is vastly different from Libya’s. A protracted war in Syria would be almost impossible to contain, and would thus destabilize Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel and Iraq, setting democratization back decades. The Libyan intervention also set a disastrous diplomatic precedent: by violating the narrowly tailored UN resolution and openly fighting for regime change, the Western powers infuriated Russia, China and other countries, sowing the seeds of their mistrust and their resistance to Security Council measures on Syria.

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The State Department has blamed the Assad regime for the latest setback, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calling its UN veto a travesty. But the administration must put aside its frustrations and
America’s Youth Uprising

The uprising of February 2011 made a single word, “Wisconsin,” not just the name of a state but the reference point for a renewal of labor militancy, mass protest and radical politics. But it did something else. It signaled that a new generation of young Americans would not just reject the lie of austerity. They would lead a fight-back that has extended from the Capitol in Madison to Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan and across the United States.

A remarkable transition has happened since Wisconsinites occupied their streets and their Capitol. Progressives have moved from despair to hope. Not to victory, but to a sense of possibility. To understand how radical, consider where things began.

Governor Scott Walker, a Republican narrowly elected in the GOP sweep of 2010, proposed just weeks after taking office to strip teachers and other public sector workers of the collective bargaining rights and union representation that provide the last thin layers of protection in an era of globalization, privatization, downsizing and deep cuts. The governor and his party had the upper hand, with control of both houses of the state legislature, a dysfunctional Democratic opposition, weakened unions, apliant press and a right-wing machine funded by billionaires like Charles and David Koch.

By the estimate of most pundits, even those who sympathized generally with labor and specifically with the Democratic Party, defeating the governor’s project was a hopeless struggle. But someone forgot to tell the students. Days after Walker’s announcement, 1,000 members and supporters of the Teaching As­sessment Council of Wisconsin—over 10,000 members and supporters of the Teachers Association of the University of Wisconsin—gathered at the Capitol to raise handmade signs and teeth-chattering voices in protest.

They kept rallying, joined first by other embattled public sector unions and then by members of private sector unions who saw that their rights were threatened as well, then by retirees, farmers and small-business owners. The Capitol was surrounded and then peacefully occupied, with students leading their teach-
ers through the doors. The numbers steadily grew, reaching close to 100,000 just one week after that first rally. Democratic state senators, after hearing the shouts of “Kill the bill!” from outside and inside the Capitol, bolted, fleeing across the state line to deny the GOP the quorum it needed to rubber-stamp Walker’s agenda. Their exit created the opening for a mass movement, as the rallies and marches spread to communities across the state. Nothing was going as planned for the governor, his party or their paymasters in the executive suites. But nothing was going as planned for the unions or their allies either.

This was an uprising, uncharted and uncontrolled. Into the thick of it strode Rage Against The Machine guitarist Tom Morello and a ragtag band of rockers who had come to sing labor songs for the tens of thousands rallying outside the Capitol. It was an electric moment that saw Wisconsinites from toddlers to septuagenarians jumping to the most rhythmic version anyone had ever heard of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land.” Morello then led the crew into the Capitol, where thousands of students, workers and their multigenerational supporters had packed the rotunda and every cranny of the sprawling century-old building. Leo Gerard, the burly Steelworkers union president, grabbed a bullhorn and told the crowd, “You have inspired this fat old white guy.” Morello was equally inspired. He told participants in the most sustained mass protest in recent American history, “Governor Walker…didn’t count on you. He didn’t count on your resolve!… This is going to be the first domino to fall in a new resurgence of labor and student power around this country. You’re setting an unprecedented example—in my lifetime, in this country, for people around the world. Believe it!”

They did believe, and thousands accepted his invitation to a free concert that night in the cavernous confines of the city’s convention center. The key claim of those who would dismiss the Wisconsin uprising has always been that it was “just a bunch of union agitators bused in from around the country.” But here, on a cold February night, were 3,500 high school and college students, most of whom had never been union members, many of whom came from families with no union ties. They were hanging on every word of songs about a labor struggle that did not involve them directly but would define their future. When Mike McColgan, the former firefighter turned lead singer of Street Dogs, urged the crowd to raise their fists and sing “Up The Union,” they did just that, with that rare mixture of joy and resolve that is the essential match of movement making. Finishing a song about creating a new labor age, McColgan shouted, “Do it!” And the students and young workers responded, “Yes! Do it!”

Commentators on these times do not turn with comfort or frequency to discussions of real change, of fundamental shifts—let alone to serious consideration of new generations demanding new worlds. What passes for journalism these days respects cynicism rather than optimism; editors and reporters have for the most part become guardians against any leap of faith. The fear of hope is not just a bow to the status quo, not just deference to the powerful. Even among the most progressive observers, there is a disinclination to employ the language of possibility for fear

**Noted.**

**MARRIAGE EQUALITY ON THE MARCH:**

On February 13, as Rick Santorum campaigned from Olympia to Tacoma, Washington became the seventh state in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage. Coming on the heels of the Proposition 8 ruling in California, the long-awaited victory was won through the efforts of State Senator Ed Murray of Seattle, who has tried to pass a marriage-equality law during every legislative biennium since 1997. But his battle isn’t over just yet.

The National Organization for Marriage has promised a referendum campaign to put the issue before voters in November—as well as $250,000 to take out and replace any Republicans who supported the bill. NOM made the same threats last year in New York, when four GOP state senators cast the deciding votes for its marriage equality law, but progressive activists funded campaigns to defend them from NOM-backed challengers. In Washington a ballot measure poses a greater threat. NOM and its allies are widely expected to gather the 120,577 signatures needed, and are stockpiling funds for a campaign to sway voters. Gay rights advocates have reason to be hopeful. A University of Washington poll this past fall showed that voters would uphold the law by a margin of 55 to 38. But with hateful rhetoric and a campaign bankrolled by out-of-state groups, anything is possible.

Statements of support from Northwest businesses like Starbucks, Microsoft and Nike lent Murray’s bill crucial momentum and will be important moving forward. Their message, embodied by a Microsoft blog post titled “Marriage Equality in Washington State Would be Good for Business,” was particularly compelling for Murray. “Businesses and communities that are tolerant and open to diversity are businesses and communities that can recruit the most talented people,” he told The Nation.  

**JUSTICE IN REVERSE IN SPAIN:** On February 9 the Spanish Supreme Court ruled that judge Baltasar Garzón was guilty of “totalitarian” practices when he ordered wiretaps to intercept lawyer-client communications in a case that had helped unearth massive corruption within the ruling conservative People’s Party. The prosecution was unprecedented and politically motivated; Garzón—the closest thing the human rights movement has to a rock star—was suspended from the courts for eleven years, in effect ending his judicial career.

But the real losers are those in Spain, Latin America and Guantanamo who thought they could count on at least one independent judge to apply human rights laws without fear of political consequences. Garzón’s real crime was seeking to investigate the atrocities of Francisco Franco in the same way he did in the case of Chile’s Augusto Pinochet. Groups like Human Rights Watch saw that we could use the “Pinochet precedent” to bring to justice tyrants and torturers who had seemed out of its reach. For more on the ruling, see “The Conviction of Baltazar Garzón” at TheNation.com.
of stirring false faith—and, just as important, for fear of being identified as one who dares to believe that what is to come might actually be better than what was. After all, these have not been progressive times; even when the people have chosen leaders who promise “Change we can believe in,” they have been repaid with compromise we cannot understand or justify.

But on that winter night the only reasonable response was to believe that the next generation might not be so easily defeated. That it might actually renew and extend movements that seemed, just days before, to have been teetering on the brink of extinction. For as long as I can remember, labor activists and their lefty allies have wrestled with the question of how to reach out to youth. Many of the smartest and most committed radicals of the 1960s and ’70s made lifetime commitments to organize, maintain and lead unions. Those who initiated movement-conscious projects like the farm labor organizing and Justice for Janitors campaigns of the ’80s, the anti-sweatshop work of the ’90s and the protests against corporate-friendly globalization that shook Seattle in 1999—all invited a next generation into the struggle. Sometimes they succeeded. But there remained a tentativeness, a sense that the one step forward would be followed by the inevitable two steps back.

But what I saw in Madison on that February night, and what I see even now, as the uprising continues in states across the country, and with the fresh variations of the Occupy movement, has been different. The connection was made—and not just at one show or for one night. The threat of a future without the right to organize, seemingly esoteric but in reality immediate and fully understandable, spurred high school and college students, young workers and the young unemployed to make a movement. They showed up, again and again and again in Madison, for rallies, marches and vigils, and they organized on their own terms: with Twitter and Facebook savvy, with energy, with a rock-and-rap passion that reminded older activists that idealism at its best comes with an edge.

I could not help recalling on that remarkable night the response of Claude Lévi-Strauss to requests that he identify the “golden age” of human civilization. The father of modern anthropology rejected the question as absurd on its face, and absurdly disempowering in its implications. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss explained that “if men have always been concerned with only one task—how to create a society fit to live in—the forces which inspired our distant ancestors are also present in us. Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered. What was done but turned out wrong, can be done again. ‘The Golden Age,’ which blind superstition had placed behind [or ahead of] us, is in us.” Those are not blandly optimistic words. They are demanding. They suggest that we have fewer excuses than we thought, that this is the place, that now is the time and that there is truth in the maxim that we are the people we’ve been waiting for. In Wisconsin, as would soon be the case nationwide, a rising generation accepted that challenge and shouted that, yes, they were ready to “Do it!”

John Nichols

John Nichols, The Nation’s Washington correspondent, is the author, most recently, of *Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, From Madison to Wall Street*, published in February by Nation Books, from which this essay is adapted.

**State of Emergency**

On January 20 the progressive think tank Michigan Forward and the Detroit branch of the NAACP sent a joint letter to Michigan Governor Rick Snyder expressing concern over Public Act 4, the Local Government and School District Fiscal Accountability Act. Signed into law in March 2011, it granted unprecedented new powers to the state’s emergency managers (EMs), including breaking union contracts, taking over pension systems, setting school curriculums and even dissolving or disincorporating municipalities. Under PA 4, EMs, who are appointed by the governor, can “exercise any power or authority of any officer, employee, department, board, commission or other similar entity of the local government whether elected or appointed.”

What are the qualifications for such a powerful office and the
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six-figure salary that accompanies it? Not much: PA 4 requires “a
minimum of 5 years’ experience and demonstrable expertise in
business, financial, or local or state budgetary matters.” Last year
the state held a pair of two-day training sessions for EMs, both
run primarily by companies that provide outsourcing services to
municipalities and school districts. Yet PA 4 made the emergency
manager the single most powerful person in the city.

Results were swift. In April the Benton Harbor EM, Joe
Harris, decreed: “Absent prior express written authorization
and approval by the Emergency Manager”—himself—“no City
Board, Commission or Authority shall take any action for or
on behalf of the City whatsoever other than: i) Call a meeting
to order, ii) Approve of meeting minutes, iii) Adjourn a meeting.” The move in effect abolished Benton Harbor’s elected
City Commission and replaced it with an unelected bureaucrat,
perhaps the first time this has happened in US history.

The implications went beyond Benton Harbor. “Since the
beginning of your administration, communities facing or under
emergency management have doubled,” Michigan Forward
and the NAACP wrote to the governor, citing a “failure of
transparency and accountability” in the process of determining
which jurisdictions need an emergency manager. The financial
review team assigned to Detroit, for instance, had recently met
in Lansing, nearly 100 miles away—a clear example of exclu-
sion and voter disenfranchisement,” according to the authors.
On February 6 an Ingham County circuit judge ruled that the
Detroit team’s meetings must be held in public.

Of Detroit’s 713,777 residents, 89 percent are African-
American. The city of Inkster (population 25,369), which recently
ly got an EM, has a black population of 73 percent. Having EMs
in both cities would mean that more than half the state’s black
population would fall into the hands of unelected officials.

Everyone agrees that something must be done to “fix”
Michigan’s struggling urban centers and school districts,
although news of a $457 million surplus in early February
prompted the state budget director to declare, “Things
have turned.” But at what cost? In 2011 Governor Snyder
stripped roughly $1 billion from statewide K-12 school fund-
ing and drastically reduced revenue sharing to municipalities.
Combined with poor and sometimes corrupt leadership and
frequently dysfunctional governments, these elements have
brought Michigan cities to the brink of bankruptcy. Residents
of the hardest-hit places have fled if they are able.

The state’s first emergency managers—previously known
as emergency financial managers—were appointed between
2000 and 2002 by Republican Governor John Engler in the
cities of Hamtramck, Flint and Highland Park to prevent them
from declaring bankruptcy. Although all eventually left when
their job was done—the last in 2009—all three cities are back
in the red. In January the Highland Park School District was
assigned an EM. (That city—population 11,776—is 93.5 per-
cent African-American.) Others followed, in Ecorse, Benton
Harbor and Pontiac, as well as Detroit public schools.

Under PA 4, EMs have proven to be a divisive solution.
Outsourcing services to private companies and abolishing col-
lective bargaining takes a page right out of the right-wing play-

Michigan,” published by the conservative Mackinac Center for
Public Policy, calls for ending “mandatory collective bargaining
for government employees who already enjoy civil service pro-
tections.” Many are worried that EMs will hasten the gentrifica-
tion of places like Benton Harbor, pushing out poor residents to
make way for developers. In one of his first acts under PA 4, Joe
Harris replaced nine people on the Brownfield Redevelopment
Authority and all nine members of the planning commission.

Despite their relatively short history, EMs have a record of
abusing their powers. This past summer Arthur Blackwell II,
Highland Park’s former emergency financial manager, was
ordered to repay more than $250,000 he paid himself. In
Pontiac EFM Michael Stampfler outsourced the city’s waste-
treatment to United Water just months after the Justice
Department announced a twenty-six-count indictment against
the company for violating the Clean Water Act.

Multiple efforts are under way to rid Michigan of PA 4.
The first is a lawsuit brought in June 2011 by the Sugar Law
Center for Economic and Social Justice and the Center for
Constitutional Rights challenging the law under the state
Constitution. Despite efforts by the Snyder administration to
bypass the legal process and force the Republican-controlled
state supreme court to hear the case immediately, the lawsuit
is pending. Representative John Conyers is pursuing the issue
through the Justice Department, arguing that the law’s impact
on minority populations may violate the Voting Rights Act.

But Michigan Republicans seem to be most concerned about a
petition drive, organized by Michigan Forward, seeking a citizen
referendum to overturn the law. As of mid-February the petition
had more than 200,000 signatures, well over the number neces-
sary to put the law on hold. The group plans to turn in the peti-
tions on February 29. Since PA 4 replaced the law that created
emergency financial managers, this could eliminate the positions
in Michigan until the referendum is voted on in November.

GOP lawmakers are discussing replacement legislation,
with Michigan House Speaker Jase Bolger warning about
“the chaos that could ensue if the emergency manager law
is suspended.” Since Michigan law prevents referendums on
appropriations bills, PA 4 opponents fear that any such law
will contain an appropriation to make it “referendum proof,”
a tactic already used by the state GOP this year.

The outcome of the citizen referendum and the constitu-
tional challenges may well determine if laws like PA 4 remain
unique to Michigan or become the national standard for deal-
ing with impoverished urban areas. With the Indiana Senate
having just passed an emergency manager bill of its own, we
may be heading down that path.

Chris Savage, who is from just outside Ann Arbor, Michigan, is the owner of
Edctablog.com, a progressive news and political commentary website.

With this double issue, we hopefully anticipate signs of
spring. Our next issue will be dated March 19. Meanwhile,
visit TheNation.com for late-breaking news updates. 
Katha Pollitt

Wislawa Szymborska, 1923–2012

In the way that you can be surprised when someone dies, no matter how rationally foreseeable the death is, I was startled to open my New York Times on February 2 and find an obituary for Wislawa Szymborska, the great Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1996. Only 88, I wanted to say. Much too young.

Szymborska’s poems are mostly short, and her output was not voluminous—only around 400 published poems. And yet, she is one of the few contemporary poets you can call beloved and not have it be a condescension or an insult. In The New York Review of Books Charles Simic called her poems “poetry’s equivalent of expository writing,” which captures their accessibility, their logical clarity and their interest in facts (especially odd ones), stories, things and people, but doesn’t convey their charm or vitality. Expository writing is, after all, a required class for college freshmen—the opposite of fun, dazzle, originality, pathos. For me, Szymborska’s signature quality is the way she puts tragedy and comedy, the unique and the banal, the big and the little, the remembering and the forgetting, right next to each other and shows us that this is what life is:

After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won’t pick
themselves up, after all.

Someone has to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the carts loaded with corpses
can get by.

—from “The End and the Beginning”

She takes the most serious themes—war, history and its many horrors, the passage of time, death, love and the loss of love—expresses them through vivid, concrete situations and gives them a wry comic twist. “Museum” shows us mortality by imagining the gleeful triumph of our “ten thousand aging things”: “The hand has lost out to the glove./The right shoe has defeated the foot.” “Hitler’s First Photograph” mocks the present for its ignorance of the future: “And who’s this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?/That’s tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers’ little boy!” The heartbreaking “Cat in an Empty Apartment,” one of her best-known poems, presents a sudden death (of a friend? suicide?) from his cat’s limited, perplexed and also increasingly irritated point of view:

Something doesn’t start
at its usual time.
Something doesn’t happen

as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

The cat doesn’t comprehend death—“just wait till he turns up”!—but really, who does?

Szymborska lived through appalling times: World War II and the brutal Nazi occupation of Poland, followed by four decades of Stalinist communism—what Elizabeth Bishop, another poet of particularity, called “our worst century so far.” After a brief “socialist realist” phase in her youth, she disclaimed grand political schemes and mass utopianism in favor of irony, wit, skepticism and the individual: “Four billion people on this earth,” she wrote in “A Large Number,” “But my imagination is still the same.” In the great poem “Starvation Camp Near Jaslo,” she writes: “History rounds off skeletons to zero./A thousand and one is still only a thousand.” For Szymborska, it is always that one who matters—transient, blind, foolish, the playing of chance that it miscalls destiny, but also urgent, insistent, full of its own meaning, alive:

Could Have

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.
You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.
You were in luck—there was a forest.
You were in luck—there were no trees.
You were in luck—a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
a jamb, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck—just then a straw went floating by.

As a result, because, although, despite.
What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
an unfortunate coincidence.

So you’re here? Still dizzy from another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn’t be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.
Patricia J. Williams

Governing for Profit

Michigan is a model of fiscal recuperation. At least that’s what the headlines said as I stepped off a plane in Detroit recently: its spending was slashed so ruthlessly in the past few years that the New York Times quoted a former state budget director as moaning, “We were so far down that the floor looked like up to us.” But now there is a budget surplus projected for 2013, of anywhere from half a billion to a billion dollars, with yet sunnier fiscal predictions ahead. This apotheosis is generally credited to the enactment of Republican Governor Rick Snyder’s stern austerity policies, which include replacing “a business tax with a corporate income tax that is expected to save businesses $1.5 billion a year,” according to the same Times article. “To make up lost dollars, lawmakers agreed to tax public workers’ pensions, reduce the state’s Earned-Income Tax Credit for the working poor, and remove or reduce other tax exemptions and deductions.”

On the ride from the airport, my friend Dee gave me an earful about what he described as “Snyder’s for-profit governance, while for us ordinary non-corporate humans, things just get bleaker.” The schools are decimated, he told me. Infrastructure is crumbling, zoos and parks are being eliminated, libraries closed and daycare all but nonexistent. Snyder has slashed funding for the state’s colleges and universities by 15 percent in the past year alone.

Moreover, Detroit is on the verge of financial ruin, in no small part because since 1998 it has been hobbled by a law requiring all cities to cut personal income taxes every year, for residents as well as nonresidents. Exemptions are given only if a city is in financial distress—a status virtually guaranteed by such cuts. “Financial distress” in turn triggers Public Act 4, an insidious law—detailed by Chris Savage on page 6 of this issue—that permits the governor to appoint an “emergency manager” (EM) whose job is, no joke, to displace elected officials and run local governments as though they were private, profit-driven corporations. Yet for all their considerable power, EMs lack the one thing that cities like Detroit need most (Republican dictum notwithstanding): the power to raise taxes. (Not that one would want a trickle-down executive branch boss like an EM tackling taxes, in addition to disappearing local legislative structures like city councils and school boards.)

EMs are balancing budgets by gutting government itself: selling off water and sewer lines (Flint), “redeveloping” public parks into private golf courses (Benton Harbor) and threatening to dissolve school districts (Highland Park). Detroit public schools, 80 percent of which fail to graduate any students with a college-qualifying ACT test score, have been taken over by GM’s former vice president for North American vehicle sales.

Meanwhile, in response to Governor Snyder’s recent intimation that funding for public universities may eventually depend on their graduation and student retention rates, the third-largest school in the system, Wayne State University, hastily revamped its admissions policy to include what a corporation might call “dashboard” measures that evaluate learning and retention as a matter of “value added.” “Value added” is a term widely introduced to the world of education as part of the Bush administration’s determination to turn learning into a business. Derived from economics and contract law, it ordinarily refers to the difference between production costs and sale price. While such arithmetic works well in the manufacturing of steel ball bearings, it’s somewhat less uteil when grading an archaeology seminar or the translation of a poem.

“Value added,” snapped Dee, “is the ultimate emblem of a ‘knowledge economy’ rather than regard for actual knowledge.” He fears it will push Wayne State further from its mission as the only urban campus in the system, one that has historically served predominantly blue-collar students who may be working multiple jobs and supporting families while going to school. Like the City University of New York, Wayne State has served as a portal for generations of strivers whose circumstances might constrain them to a trajectory of eight, ten or even fifteen years to earn enough credits to graduate. Such hard-working students will now be written off as failures for dragging down the value-added goal of four-year graduation rates. The Detroit Free Press reports that in screening for applicants most likely to graduate in the requisite amount of time, Wayne State plans to create three groups: “those accepted, those who first need to complete an eight-week summer ‘bridge’ academic program, and those who will be counseled to attend a community college, trade school or even the military.”

Not surprisingly, many fear that students in Detroit’s already underserved public high schools will be passed over in even greater numbers as university seats are outsourced to wealthier students from out of town, from out of state or from other countries—from anywhere primary education is better funded.

But what of the budget surplus? I asked Dee. Surely that found money could be put to the rescue? Alas, no. Of more than $1 billion in cuts to school budgets last year, Snyder is restoring less than half—and not to per capita expenditure on pupils but for incentive programs. Schools that perform best will get the most money; those that “fail” could be eliminated. In other words, those with the most troubled students or least experienced teachers or children who speak little English or with high percentages of learning disabilities—those are the schools most likely to be assigned less assistance, less investment, less hope.

“Michigan’s future is dependent upon the education system,” says Michigan State Representative Jeff Irwin, who has called for funds taken from K-12 to be reappropriated. And to those in the Snyder administration who would prefer to squirrel the bulk of the surplus away for a rainy day, Peter Spadafore, who sits on Lansing’s school board, has a curt riposte: “It’s raining.”
Gen. Mohammed al-Sumali sits in the passenger seat of his armored Toyota Land Cruiser as it whizzes down the deserted highway connecting the Yemeni port city of Aden to Abyan province, where Islamist militants have overrun the provincial capital of Zinjibar. Sumali, a heavy-set man with glasses and a mustache, is the commander of the 25th Mechanized Brigade of the Yemeni armed forces and the man charged with cleansing Zinjibar of the militants. Sumali’s task carries international significance: retaking Zinjibar is seen by many as a final test of the flailing regime of Yemen’s president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the unpopular ruler who has deftly exploited the US government’s perception of him as an ally in the fight against terrorism to maintain his grip on power.

The only real traffic on this road consists of refugees fleeing the fighting and heading toward Aden, and military reinforcements moving toward Zinjibar. Sumali did not want to drive out to the front lines on this day and tried to dissuade the journalists in his office. “You know there could be mortars fired at you,” he tells us. Twice, the militants in Zinjibar tried to assassinate the general in that very vehicle. There is a bullet hole in the front windshield, just above his head, and another in his side window, the spider web cracks from the bullets’ impact clearly visible. When we agree not to hold him or his men responsible for what might happen to us, he relents, and we pile in and take off.

As we ride along the coast of the Arabian Sea, past stacks of abandoned mortar tubes, Russian T-72 tanks dug into sand berms and the occasional wandering camel, General Sumali gives his account of what happened on May 27, 2011. On that day, several hundred militants laid siege to Zinjibar, thirty miles northeast of the important southern city of Aden, killing several soldiers, driving out local officials and taking control within two days. Sumali attributes the takeover to an “intelligence breakdown,” explaining, “We were surprised in late May with the flow of a large number of terrorist militants into Zinjibar.” He adds that the militants “raided and attacked some security sites. They were able to seize these institutions. We were surprised when the governor, his deputies and other local officials fled to Aden.” As the Yemeni military began fighting the militants, General Sumali tells me, men from Yemen’s Central Security Forces fled, abandoning heavy weaponry as they retreated. The CSF, whose counterterrorism unit is armed, trained and funded by the United States, is commanded by President Saleh’s nephew Yahya. (A media outlet associated with the militants reported that they seized “heavy artillery pieces, modern antiaircraft weapons, a number of tanks and armored transports in addition to large quantities of different kinds of ammunition.”)

Sumali says that as his forces attempted to repel the attack on Zinjibar in early June, they were attacked by the militants using the artillery seized from the CSF units. “Many of my men were killed,” he says. The Islamist fighters also conducted a series of bold raids on the base of the 25th Mechanized on the southern outskirts of Zinjibar. In all, more than 230 Yemeni soldiers have been killed in battles with the militants since last May. “These guys are incredibly brave,” the general concedes, speaking of the militants. “If I had an army full of men with that bravery, I could conquer the world.”
According to critics of the crumbling Saleh regime, Sumali’s account is charitable at best about the role played by the Yemeni security forces in Zinjibar. They allege that Saleh’s forces allowed the city to fall. The fighting there began as Saleh faced mounting calls both inside and outside Yemen for his resignation; several of his key allies had defected to the growing opposition movement. After thirty-three years of outwitting his opponents, they say, Saleh saw that the end was near. “Saleh himself actually handed over Zinjibar to these militants,” asserts Abdul Ghani al Iryani, a well-connected political analyst. “He ordered his police force to evacuate the city and turn it over to the militants because he wanted to send a signal to the world that, without me, Yemen will fall into the hands of the terrorists.” That theory, while unproven, is not baseless. Since the mujahedeen war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and continuing after 9/11, Saleh has famously milked the threat of Al Qaeda and other militants to leverage counterterrorism funding and weapons from the United States and Saudi Arabia, to bolster his power within the country and to neutralize opponents.

Saleh has famously milked the threat of Al Qaeda and other militants to leverage US counterterrorism funding and weapons.

A Yemeni government official, who asked to remain anonymous because he is not authorized to speak publicly about military issues, admitted that troops from the US-trained and -supported Republican Guard did not respond when the militants entered the town. Those forces are commanded by Saleh’s son, Ahmed Ali. Neither did those forces loyal to one of the most powerful military figures in the country, Gen. Ali Mohsen, commander of the 1st Armored Division, move in. Two months before Zinjibar was seized, Mohsen had defected from the Saleh regime and was supporting his overthrow.

Moreover, just who exactly these militants were who overtook Zinjibar is a matter of some dispute. According to the Yemeni government, they were operatives of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group Washington has identified as the single most dangerous terrorist threat facing the United States. But the militants who took the city did not claim to be from AQAP. Instead, they announced themselves as a new group, Ansar al Sharia, or Supporters of Sharia. Senior Yemeni officials told me that Ansar al Sharia is simply a front for Al Qaeda. They point out that the first known public reference to the group was made a month before the attack on Zinjibar by AQAP’s top cleric, Adil al-Abab. “The name Ansar al Sharia is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals, and that we are on the path of Allah,” he said, adding that the new name was intended to put the focus on the message of the group so as to avoid being bogged down with the baggage of the Al Qaeda brand. Whether Ansar al Sharia had more independent origins or it’s merely a product of AQAP’s crude rebranding campaign, as Abab claims, the group’s significance would soon extend well beyond Al Qaeda’s historically limited spheres of influence in Yemen while simultaneously popularizing some of AQAP’s core tenets.

As we make our way with General Sumali down the abandoned highway, we pass the May 22 “Unity” Stadium, which was meticulously refurbished for the November 2010 Gulf 20 soccer tournament. It was meant to serve as a symbol that Yemen was safe for tourists. Indeed, thousands flocked to the country—many from neighboring Saudi Arabia and East Africa—to cheer for their teams. Luxury hotels were built for the occasion, and foreign dignitaries, including a few heads of state, came to Yemen for the opening ceremonies, which were presided over by President Saleh. A campaign involving “moderate” clerics from other Arab nations was simultaneously launched, called “the Battle of Hearts and Minds Against Al Qaeda.”

Six months later, the new hotels were vacant, and the stadium had become an emblem of instability. During the fighting over Zinjibar, the militants seized the stadium and Sumali’s forces had to shell it to force them back. As we drive past it, the damage is clear in the charred ruins of the upper rafters.

We pass the first front line on the outskirts of Zinjibar, “Tiger 1,” and drive a half-mile to “Tiger 2.” Sumali reluctantly agrees to let us get out. “We will only stay for two minutes,” he says. “It’s dangerous here.” The general is soon besieged by his men. They look thin and haggard, many with long beards and tattered uniforms or no uniforms at all. Some of them plead with Sumali to write them notes authorizing additional combat pay. One of the soldiers tells him, “I was with you when you were ambushed. I helped fight off the attack.” Sumali scribbles on a piece of paper and hands it to the soldier. The scene continues until Sumali gets back into the Toyota. As we drive away, he speaks from his armored vehicle through a loudspeaker at his men. “Keep fighting. Do not give up!”

Sumali tells me he cannot “confirm or deny” that Ansar al Sharia is actually AQAP. “What is important for me, as a soldier, is that they have taken up arms against us. Anyone who is attacking our institutions and military camps and killing our soldiers, we will fight them regardless of if they are Al Qaeda affiliates or Ansar al Sharia,” he says. “We don’t care what they call themselves. And I can’t confirm whether Ansar al Sharia is affiliated with Al Qaeda or if they are an independent group.”

The capture of Zinjibar came at a time when the Saleh regime was disintegrating and its attention was focused squarely on confronting the mounting campaign to bring down his government. “Ongoing instability in Yemen provides [AQAP] with greater freedom to plan and conduct operations,” the director of national intelligence, James Clapper, alleged to the Senate Intelligence Committee on January 31. “AQAP has exploited the political unrest to adopt a more aggressive
"My dream is that when the history of this era is written, it will be said that America was taken off guard at the height of its power at the turn of the century, that it stumbled for a decade in an unfamiliar environment, but that in the next decade found a new national commitment of unity and resolve to adapt to America’s new status and leadership role in the world."

—Senator Russ Feingold
strategy in southern Yemen, and it continues to threaten US and Western diplomatic interests.” Clapper concluded bluntly, “AQAP remains the [Al Qaeda] node most likely to attempt transnational attack.”

There is no question that AQAP took advantage of the moment, shrewdly recognizing that its message of a Sharia-based system of law and order would be welcomed by many in Abyan who viewed the Saleh regime as a US puppet. The US missile strikes, the civilian casualties, an almost total lack of government services and a deepening poverty all contributed. “As these groups of militants took over the city, then AQAP came in and also tribes from areas that have been attacked in the past by the Yemeni government and by the US government,” says Iryani, the political analyst. “They came because they have a feud against the regime and against the US. There is a nucleus of AQAP, but the vast majority are people who are aggrieved by attacks on their homes that forced them to go out and fight.” According to statistics published by the US Agency for International Development, “insecurity displaced more than 40,000 Zinjibaris in 2011.”

Support for Al Qaeda’s agenda is merging with the mounting rage of powerful tribes at attacks by the United States and its alliance with Saleh.

Unlike the militant movement Al Shabab in Somalia, AQAP has never taken control of significant swathes of territory in Yemen. But Ansar al Sharia pledged to do just that, declaring an Islamic Emirate in Abyan. Once Ansar al Sharia and its allies solidified their grip on Zinjibar, they implemented an agenda aimed at winning hearts and minds. “Ansar al Sharia has been much more proactive in attempting to provide services in areas in Yemen where the government has virtually disappeared,” says Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen scholar at Princeton University. “It has claimed that it is following the Taliban model in attempting to provide services and Islamic government where the central government in Yemen has left a vacuum.”

Ansar al Sharia repaired roads, restored electricity, distributed food and began security patrols inside the city and its surroundings. It also established Sharia courts where disputes could be resolved. “Al Qaeda and Ansar al Sharia brought security to the people in areas that were famous for insecurity, famous for thefts, for roadblocks,” says Abdul Rezzaq al Jamal, an independent Yemeni journalist who regularly interviews Al Qaeda leaders and has spent extensive time in Zinjibar. “The people I met in Zinjibar were grateful to Al Qaeda and Ansar al Sharia for maintaining security.” While the militants in Abyan may be bringing law and order, this is, at times, enforced with horrifying tactics such as limb amputations against accused thieves and public floggings of suspected drug users. In one incident in the Ansar al Sharia–held town of Jaar, residents said they were summoned to a gruesome event where militants used a sword to chop off the hands of two young men accused of stealing electric cables. The amputated limbs were then paraded around the town as a warning to would-be thieves. One of the young men, a 15-year-old, reportedly died soon after from massive blood loss. On February 12, Ansar al Sharia in Jaar publicly beheaded two men it alleged had provided information to the United States to conduct drone strikes. A third man was executed in Shebwa.

In mid-January, Ansar al Sharia overran parts of another town, Radaa, 100 miles southeast of Sanaa, resulting in a fresh round of government shelling and street battles between government forces and Ansar al Sharia and AQAP. “The threat of Al Qaeda is now real and can’t be underestimated, especially now that they have found supporters and a safe haven from which to operate,” says Sumali.

The taking of Zinjibar could be an indication that AQAP is effectively exploiting the growing power vacuum in Yemen. But what could be more dangerous is that support for AQAP’s agenda is indigenously spreading and merging with the mounting rage of powerful tribes at US counterterrorism policy and Washington’s years of support for the Saleh regime.

By late 2011, the United States had largely withdrawn its military assets from Yemen, including Special Operations forces, leaving much of the coordination for Yemen ops to the US forces stationed in the East African nation of Djibouti, where the United States has a large military base. The US-backed Yemeni Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) and Republican Guard forces no longer operated under the tutelage and direction of their US sponsors. CTU commanders told me in January that they don’t even have ammunition for their US-supplied M4 assault rifles. As battles raged at the premier front line in Abyan in late December/early January, Yahya Saleh, the US-backed head of the CTU, was nowhere to be found in Yemen. When I visited a CTU training base outside Sanaa, his men claimed not to know where he was. Senior Yemeni officials also said they had no idea where he was—other than that he was out of the country. They said they did not know when he would return. Eventually, in mid-January, Yahya posted pictures of himself online, hanging out in Havana with the family of Che Guevara.

Rather than fighting AQAP, these US-backed units—created and funded with the explicit intent to be used only for counterterrorism operations—redeployed to Sanaa to protect the collapsing regime from its own people. The US-supported units exist “mostly for the defense of the regime,” says Iryani. “In the fighting in Abyan, the counterterrorism forces have not been deployed in any effective way. They are still here in the palace [in Sanaa], protecting the palace. That’s how it is.” President Obama’s top counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, acknowledged late last year that the “political tumult” has caused the US-trained units “to be focused on their positioning for internal political purposes as opposed to doing all they can against AQAP.”

The Obama administration was very slow to agitate for Saleh’s departure from power, in large part because of counterterrorism concerns. On January 28, Saleh arrived in New York, ostensibly for medical treatment, eliciting charges from his opponents that
the United States was protecting him from the wrath of his people. For years, Saleh allowed the United States to regularly strike against AQAP in Yemen, and US Special Operations forces built up the specialized units, run by Saleh’s family members, that were widely seen as US surrogates. Saleh’s government actively conspired with US officials to cover up the US role in Yemen, at times publicly taking credit for US bombings. Even as demonstrations grew against the Saleh regime, US officials praised his government’s cooperation. “I can say today the counterterrorism cooperation with Yemen is better than it’s been during my whole tenure,” Brennan declared in September.

But US counterterrorism policy is extremely unpopular in Yemen. Whether a new government would continue the same type of counterterrorism relationship Saleh had with Washington is very much in question. In a series of interviews, Mohammed Qahtan and other leaders of the main opposition group, the Islah Party, sharply criticized US airstrikes in Yemen and the targeted killing of terrorism suspects, saying that they should have been put on trial in Yemen. Qahtan, the leader of Islah’s Muslim Brotherhood faction, charged that under Saleh, “The Yemeni government behaved in the war on terror as a contractor for the US,” adding that if Islah and its allies take control of the country, “we will not be contractors for the US, implementing what they want according to the money we receive. Our slogan is, ‘We are partners, not contractors.’”

The past several months have opened a window onto the emerging US counterterrorism approach post-Saleh. When the political crisis began to deepen in Yemen late last year, the Obama administration decided to pull out most of the US military personnel in Yemen, including those training Yemen’s counterterrorism forces. “They have left because of the security situation,” Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, Saleh’s foreign minister, told me at his office in Sanaa. “Certainly, I think if they do not return and the counterterrorism units are not provided with the necessary ammunition and equipment, it will have an impact” on counterterrorism operations. Now the United States is doubling down on its use of air power and drones, which are swiftly becoming the primary focus of Washington’s counterterrorism operations.

By last summer, the Obama administration had begun construction on a secret air base on the Arabian peninsula, closer than its base in Djibouti, that could serve as a launching pad for expanded drone strikes in Yemen. The September drone strike that killed US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki was reportedly launched from that new base, which analysts suspect is either in Saudi Arabia or Oman, both of which border Yemen. While the United States is largely absent on the ground now in Yemen, it continues coordination with Yemeni intelligence on counterterrorism operations. In late January the United States carried out a series of airstrikes in Abyan, and, according to Sumali, US forces conducted at least two other strikes around Zinjibar that “targeted Al Qaeda leaders who are on the US terrorist black list,” though he adds, “I did not coordinate directly in these attacks.” According to Sumali, US helicopters have—on several occasions—flown in supplies for the 25th Mechanized. The Americans have also provided real-time intelligence, obtained by drones, to Yemeni forces in
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Abyan. “It has been an active partnership. The Americans help primarily with logistics and intelligence,” Sumali says. “Then we pound the positions with artillery or airstrikes.”

For years, the elite Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA had teams deployed inside Yemen that supported Yemeni forces and conducted unilateral operations, consisting mostly of cruise missile and drone attacks. Some of the unilateral strikes have killed their intended targets, such as the CIA attack on Awlaki. But others have killed civilians—at times, a lot of civilians. And many of these have been in Abyan and its neighboring province of Shebwa, both of which have recently seen a substantial rise of AQAP activity. President Obama’s first known authorization of a missile strike on Yemen, on December 17, 2009, killed more than forty Bedouins, many of them women and children, in the remote village of al Majala in Abyan. Another US strike, in May 2010, killed an important tribal leader and the deputy governor of Marib province, Jabir Shabwani, sparking mass anger at the United States and Saleh’s government. “I think these airstrikes were based on false intelligence from the regime, because that is the nature of the contractor,” Qahtan charges. “The contractor wants to create more work in return for earning more money.”

The October drone strike that killed Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman, a US citizen, and his teenage cousin shocked and enraged Yemenis of all political stripes. “I firmly believe that the [military] operations implemented by the US performed a great service for Al Qaeda, because those operations gave Al Qaeda unprecedented local sympathy,” says Jamal, the Yemeni journalist. The strikes “have recruited thousands.” Yemeni tribesmen, he says, share one common goal with Al Qaeda, “which is revenge against the Americans, because those who were killed are the sons of the tribesmen, and the tribesmen never, ever give up on revenge.” Even senior officials of the Saleh regime recognize the damage the strikes have caused. “People certainly resent these [US] interventions,” Qirbi, the foreign minister and a close Saleh ally, concedes.

Such resentments mingle easily with the political and religious message of Al Qaeda and with the growing radicalization of the religious landscape, particularly in impoverished areas neglected by the Yemeni government, like Abyan. “Of course, when people are in that kind of circumstance then they need to hold on to some kind of ideological banner, so they start talking about the Caliphate and all that stuff,” says Iryani. At large rallies held by opponents of Saleh’s regime in Sanaa, prominent conservative imams deliver stinging sermons denouncing the United States and Israel. The United States may see AQAP as a membership organization with a finite number of members who can be taken out through a drone- and Tomahawk missile–fueled war of attrition, but there are varying shades of support and involvement among broader segments of Yemeni society. While there are certainly some foreign operatives in AQAP, the majority of those described as “militants” are Yemenis who belong to powerful tribes. “In recent months, Ansar al Sharia appears to have attracted a number of new members,” says Johnsen, the Yemen scholar at Princeton. “The group has essentially attempted to flatten itself out in Yemen in order to appeal to as many people as possible, which means that it takes the popular parts of AQAP’s platform, while downplaying the more controversial sections.”

While General Sumali talks of the need to “cleanse” Abyan of the “terrorists,” it is hardly that simple. The US bombs and the Yemeni military shelling of Zinjibar have increased support for Ansar al Sharia, allowing it to fulfill its claim that it is a defender of the people in the face of an onslaught backed by America. The attacks also serve as hard evidence that, as Awlaki and the leaders of AQAP alleged, the United States intends to target Yemen as it has Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. “I wish to send a message to my brothers and the honorable people of Abyan,” declared Abu Hamza al Murqoshi, the emir of Ansar al Sharia, in a videotaped “Message to Abyan” posted in late January. “The entire world has united against us with this treacherous government, which has demolished your homes and destroyed the infrastructure. You have joined the fight against this state and its allies, the Americans.”

Some US drone and cruise missile attacks have killed their intended targets. Others have killed civilians—at times, a lot of civilians.

The key to accomplishing anything in Yemen is navigating its labyrinthine tribal system. For years, a tribal patronage network helped bolster Saleh’s regime. Many tribes have had a neutral view of AQAP or have seen it as a minor nuisance; some have fought against Al Qaeda forces, while others have given them safe haven or shelter. The stance of many tribes toward Al Qaeda has depended on how they believe AQAP can forward their agenda.

But US policy has enraged tribal leaders who could potentially keep AQAP in check and has, over the past three years of regular bombings, taken away the motivation for many leaders to do so. Several southern leaders angrily told me stories of US and Yemeni attacks in their areas that killed civilians and livestock and destroyed or damaged scores of homes. If anything, the US airstrikes and support for Saleh-family-run counterterrorism units has increased tribal sympathy for Al Qaeda. “Why should we fight them? Why?” asks Sheik Ali Abdullah Abdulal, a southern tribal sheik from Shebwa who adopted the nom du guerre Mullah Zabara, he says, out of admiration for Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. “If my government built schools, hospitals and roads and met basic needs, I would be loyal to my government and protect it. So far, we don’t have basic services such as electricity, water pumps. Why should we fight Al Qaeda?” He says that AQAP controls large swaths of Shebwa, conceding that the group does “provide security and prevent looting. If your car is stolen, they will get it back for you.” In areas “controlled by the government, there is looting and robbery. You can see the difference,” Zabara adds, “If we don’t pay more attention, Al
Zabara is quick to clarify that he believes AQAP is a terrorist group bent on attacking the United States, but that is hardly his central concern. “The US sees Al Qaeda as terrorism, and we consider the drones terrorism,” he says. “The drones are flying day and night, frightening women and children, disturbing sleeping people. This is terrorism.” Zabara says several US strikes in his region have killed scores of civilians and that his community is littered with unexploded cluster bombs, which have detonated, killing children. He and other tribal leaders asked the Yemeni and US governments for assistance in removing them, he says. “We did not get any response, so we use our guns to explode them.” He also says the US government should pay money to the families of civilians killed in the missile strikes of the past three years. “We demand compensation from the US for killing Yemeni citizens, just like the Lockerbie case,” he declares. “The world is one village. The US received compensation from Libya for the Lockerbie bombing, but the Yemenis have not.”

I meet Mullah Zabara and his men at the airport in Aden, in southern Yemen, along the coast where the USS Cole was bombed in October 2000, killing seventeen US sailors. Zabara is dressed in black tribal clothes, complete with a jambiya (dagger) at his stomach. For a modern twist, he is also packing a Beretta on his hip. Zabara is a striking figure, with leathery skin and a large scar that forms a crescent moon along his right eye. “I don’t know this American,” he says to my Yemeni colleague. “So if anything happens to me as a result of this meeting—if I get kidnapped—we’ll just kill you later.” Everyone laughs nervously. We chat for a while on a corniche on the coast before he drives us around the city for a tour. About twenty minutes into the tour, he pulls over on the side of the road and buys a six-pack of Heineken from a shanty store, toses one to me, cracks open a can for himself and speeds off. It is 11 AM.

“Once I got stopped by AQAP guys at one of their checkpoints, and they saw I had a bottle of Johnnie Walker,” he recalls as he guzzles his second Heineken in ten minutes and lights a cigarette. “They asked me, ‘Why do you have that?’ I told them, ‘to drink it.’” He laughs heartily. “I told them to bother another guy and drove off.” The message of the story is clear: the Al Qaeda guys don’t want trouble with tribal leaders. “I am not afraid of Al Qaeda; I go to their sites and meet them. We are all known tribesmen, and they have to meet us to solve their disputes.” Plus, he adds: “I have 30,000 fighters in my own tribe. Al Qaeda can’t attack me.”

Zabara has served as a mediator with AQAP for the Yemeni government and was instrumental in securing the release in November of three French aid workers held hostage by the militant group for six months. He said he intervened after an AQAP agent called him. “A person phoned me and told me that they would kill the French in revenge for the death of al­Awlaki,” Zabara recalls. “I traveled to where they were and told them, ‘If you kill the French, we will fight you using our daggers.’” Eventually, Zabara—along with an undisclosed sum of money—was able to persuade AQAP to release the hostages. He whips out his cellphone and shows me several pictures he took of the hostages as they were being freed.

Zabara was also asked by the Yemeni minister of defense to mediate with the militants in Zinjibar on several occasions, including to retrieve bodies of soldiers killed in areas held by Ansar al Sharia. “I have nothing against Al Qaeda or the government,” he says. “I started the mediation in order to stop bloodshed and to achieve peace.” In Zinjibar, his efforts were unsuccessful. He tells me that while mediating, he has met AQAP operatives from the United States, France, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

I ask him if he ever meets with top AQAP leaders. “Fahd al­Quos is from my tribe,” he replies with a smile, referring to one of the most wanted suspects from the Cole bombing. He also says he met Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the alleged “underwear bomber” charged with attempting to blow up a passenger flight over Detroit in December 2009. “I saw [Said] al­Shihri and [Nasir] al­Wuhayshi five days ago in Shebwa,” he casually adds, referring to the two senior AQAP leaders, both of them US-designated terrorists. “We were walking, and they said, ‘Peace be upon you.’ I replied, ‘Peace be upon you too.’ We have nothing against them. In the past, it was unthinkable to run into them. They were hiding in the mountains and caves, but now they are walking in the streets and going to restaurants.” Why is that? I ask. “The regime, the ministers and officials are squandering the money allocated to fight Al Qaeda, while Al Qaeda expands,” he says. The United States “funds the Political Security and the National Security [forces], which spend money traveling here and there, in Sanaa or in the US, with their family. All the tribes get is airstrikes against us.” He adds that counterterrorism “has become like an investment” for the US­backed units. “If they fight seriously, the funds will stop. They prolonged the conflict with Al Qaeda to receive more funds” from the United States.

That, in a nutshell, is how many Yemenis see the US role in their country. The United States “should have never made counterterrorism a source of profit for the regime, because that increased terrorism,” asserts Iryani. “Their agenda was to keep terrorism alive, because it was their cash cow.” The US bombings, he said, were “a bad mistake. Military action often backfires by killing civilians, by the violation of sovereignty. That offends a lot of Yemenis.” For the United States, the most serious question that lingers over Yemen after Ali Abdullah Saleh is: Did US counterterrorism policy strengthen the very threat it sought to eliminate? “It was a major fiasco,” Iryani says of the past decade of US counterterrorism policy in Yemen. “I think if we had been left alone, we would have less terrorists in Yemen than we do now.”
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Israel’s New Left Goes Online

The brash webzine +972 is challenging a society that has moved steadily to the right.

by SARAH WILDMAN

In mid-December a young Palestinian named Mustafa Tamimi was struck in the face with a tear-gas canister fired from an Israeli armored vehicle. It happened during one of the Friday protests, a weekly event in West Bank villages like Nabi Saleh, where Tamimi lived; he later died from his wounds. In the ensuing battle over culpability—so much of which took place, like everything else these days, on Twitter—a number of English-language bloggers challenged Israeli military spokespeople about the event, again and again, and kept the story of Tamimi’s death in the news.

Readers of the New York Times Lede Blog, which picked up the Twitter war over Tamimi, may have noticed that in recent months a number of “journalists and bloggers” have served as the source for events like these, the protests and tragedies, cultural battles and political conversations, that are taking place in both Israel and the occupied territories. What might not be immediately clear is that these bloggers are almost all drawn from one site, an eighteen-month-old webzine called +972. The name refers to the country code used to call Israel (and, not incidentally, the West Bank) from outside the country; it is a number that has no political affiliation, no historic connection and no space on the political spectrum. It simply represents the geographic space. That suits the bloggers of +972 just fine.

Born in the summer of 2010 as an umbrella outfit for a group of (mostly) pre-existing blogs, +972 steadily morphed into something more cohesive. The site is now an online home for more than a dozen writers, a mix of Israelis, binational American- and Canadian-Israelis, and two Palestinians, all of whom occupy, if you’ll forgive the term, space on the spectrum of the left. What that means is that though the writers of +972 are, purposefully, uniformly progressive (they are all avowedly against the occupation), they have differences: they disagree with one another about exactly how to change the status quo; they disagree over how to incorporate the need for social justice in Israeli Jewish society into the debate about Palestinian rights. And they regularly argue among themselves over subjects generally taboo not only in the mainstream US media—a one-state solution to the conflict, for example—but also in Israel.

Indeed, as wrangling in the United States over Israel-Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish (Republican candidates promising to summarily move the US Embassy to Palestine has become more and more cartoonish), they have differences: they disagree with one another and organizations labeled anti-Semitic for daring to breathe a word of criticism toward Israel), this start-up news site is challenging mainstream Israeli and foreign journalists to fill the lacuna in their coverage of the conflict and upending the conversational status quo about the future of the Jewish state.

Because it is written primarily in Israel, +972 is unencumbered by the careful dialogue we have cultivated in this country, and yet because it is written in English, the site enables American (and international) readers to see just how constrained our opinions have become. That said, +972’s original tag line, “Independent commentary from Israel & the Palestinian territories,” quickly added the word “reporting” (and shortened to “Israel & Palestine”) as it became increasingly clear that these writers, all of whom earn their living elsewhere, are not merely armchair gadflies but also on-the-ground reporters inside Israel and on the other side of the 1967 borders. As Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian contributor, told me, “The first time an ambulance is stopped at a checkpoint, it gets reported; the second, third time, it doesn’t get reported. +972 tries to make sure people don’t get used to it, that it’s not OK.”

The idea for a blog came to Noam Sheizaf, 37, +972’s editor in chief and CEO, after covering the 2008 American elections for the Israeli daily Maariv. Sheizaf saw how important the blogosphere had become to political journalism in the States; he believed the medium was useful, though not yet well used in Israel. “Also something about the political conversation in Israel, in 2008, felt really stuck,” he told me. “Israel was sort of like this island dealing with questions no one cared about and looking away from the real, existential political issues that it needed to face. It was as if there wasn’t a political conversation going on about anything. There wasn’t a serious conversation on the economy; and there wasn’t a serious conversation on the occupation.” At the time, he launched a personal blog called Promised Land. Simultaneously, and separately, a handful of other Israeli writers were doing the same, establishing critical blogs, in English, outside Israel.

Sheizaf is magnetic, intellectual and articulate. The same is true, I discover, of the handful of other +972 writers and editors I spoke with last summer in Tel Aviv and in the fall when some of them came to speak in New York and Washington, DC: Dimi Reider, a St. Petersburg–born writer; Yossi Gurvitz, whose Hebrew-language blog recently got him into trouble with the Israeli police for “incitement to violence”; Lisa Goldman, a Canadian-born translator and writer; Yuval Ben-Ami, who writes surreptitiously political travelogues about discovering his own country (he was detained not long after we met for tres-
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passing into areas of the West Bank where Israelis are forbidden to roam); Dahlia Scheindlin, a consultant for nonprofit groups, pollster and academic; Shir Harel, an American-Israeli who grew up in New Jersey and is now the +972 site manager; and Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian human rights activist who lives half the time in America, directing a conflict resolution center at George Mason University, and half the time leading “dual narrative” tours of Israel (his brother was tortured in an Israeli prison and died at 19, not long after he was released). I also spoke, by phone, with Larry Derfner, a more recent addition to the team. Derfner, who came on board when the Jerusalem Post dropped his column after he suggested in his blog that Israeli policy and practice might inspire Palestinian terror, is an outspoken critic of the incessant drumbeat for war with Iran. Derfner and Scheindlin are closest to the mainstream left, while others veer toward radical, but +972 gives each blogger a place to both vent and expose, debate and parry.

As Goldman explained to me, Sheizaf is responsible for financial and administrative matters, and for bringing in new contributors (recruits are then voted on by the group and can be rejected). Otherwise, there is no hierarchy. Two rotating editors [recently changed to one editor] copy-edit and do a legal sweep on each story. But, she said, “ninety-nine percent of the time, the editors don’t touch our copy beyond correcting typos. If they see something that needs to be changed for legal reasons, they’ll notify the writer before making the change. Editors send out story suggestions and ask if anyone’s interested in writing about them.” There are no assignments as such.

Though they are not all young—the median age is around 35, with writers who go well north and well south of that—the contributors represent something of a generational shift in liberal-left thinking. They do not question the right of Israel to exist (it is an Israeli site, after all), but most +972 writers believe that the Zionist experiment, while largely successful, strikingly failed to consider what two peoples on one land really meant for the future, let alone what a longstanding occupation would mean for Israel and its people. The writers are fringe; don’t be mistaken. But they are on the whole far smarter and more nuanced than most who attract that label.

The site takes for granted certain positions about which most Americans are, at best, unsure. In one of the most-read posts of 2011, Sheizaf wrote about the Nakba (catastrophe), as Palestinians refer to the 1948 war, commonly called in Israel the War of Independence. “Even after the New Historians of the nineties made the term Nakba a part of modern Hebrew and real peace seemed distant, unattainable, perhaps not even possible, the only one actually trying to do any journalism in the occupied territories and dehumanized an entire community, consciously or subconsciously rendering it a second-class, semi-legitimate target for brutal violence.” (Commentary magazine picked up this post, admiringly.) Reider says he just wanted to start a conversation. “I don’t think I fit into any existing political party in Israel,” he told me. “I don’t think many of the +972 writers do, either. I think we are all part of a process of redrawing the Israeli political map.”

In the years after the horrors of the second intifada—once the terror had calmed, the dead were buried and the “security” wall went up—reporting over the so-called Green Line, otherwise known as the 1967 borders, changed dramatically. That is to say, it all but dried up. Yitzhak Rabin and the spirit of Oslo that he inspired were both dead; the right wing controlled the prime minister’s office and, increasingly, the Knesset. Israeli society was deeply traumatized by the waves of suicide bombings. Many hoped for nothing but quiet, and real peace seemed distant, unattainable, perhaps not even worthwhile. The peace-seeking left sputtered and wandered in a desiccated landscape of diminished support.

Even before the much-ballyhooed “death” of the left, many younger journalists had only ever seen the Israel–Palestine conflict in the context of the intifada. “They don’t know anything but the occupation and checkpoints and settlements, and it’s like yesterday’s news,” Akiva Eldar, a Haaretz columnist and an éminence grise of the Israeli liberal establishment, told me. “They know that when they offer the editor another story on a new settlement, a new outpost, atrocities, it doesn’t sell newspapers. And since the Israeli media, like everywhere, is in deep trouble, especially print...they give the public what they want to hear. And people don’t want to hear not only about the atrocities and what is going on in the West Bank; they are not even interested in the peace process.” They want, he continued, to “feel good” about the government. “They feel good with the narrative,” he said, one that claims “we are the good guys. And [that] we offered everything [to make peace].”

Oren Persico, a journalist with the watchdog site Seventh Eye, which offers a daily critique of the Israeli media, agreed. “What was once obvious is actually rare,” he said. “Haaretz is the only one actually trying to do any journalism in the occupied territories, and if you are looking for a left perspective on anything economic, you won’t find it anywhere.” Further, he confirmed, “the commercial press doesn’t want to touch the occupation with a stick, because it doesn’t sell. It alienates the Jewish public. People don’t want to know.”

The media-watchers’ concerns are born out by numbers:
Israelis, on the whole, favor more mainstream (and conservative) publications like Yediot Avaronot and Maariv over Haaretz, which has a big readership in the United States, in no small part for its liberal views and its strong English-language site. But Haaretz, let alone +972, is distinctly not the norm: in 2007 the Israeli media world was upended by the introduction of the free newspaper Israel Hayom (Israel Today), an unabashedly right-wing, pro-Netanyahu daily that many believe helped him retake the prime minister’s office in 2009. Funded by casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who has disavowed the two-state solution, publicly and aggressively dressed down those who would aid the Palestinians (including AIPAC) and poured millions into the Super PAC that propped up Newt Gingrich’s presidential campaign, by 2011 Israel Hayom had surpassed Yediat as the most read newspaper in the country. The paper is deeply entwined with the current government; one of its columnists was recently exposed as being on Netanyahu’s office payroll.

It’s not just newspapers that have changed; Israeli youth have moved steadily to the right in the years since the second intifada. A Friedrich Ebert Stiftung poll from 2010 showed that a majority of 15- to 24-year-olds favor a continuation of the status quo over an invigorated peace process; they would also choose a Jewish state over a specifically democratic one.

That said, in the past two years or so there has also been what Dahlia Scheindlin calls a “reawakening” of the left, and it is in the context of this awakening that +972 was born. To some degree the rebirth came with Solidarity, a movement formed in support of Sheikh Jarrah, an East Jerusalem neighborhood where Palestinian families are being forced from homes they have lived in for decades, which symbolizes for some the housing inequities and citizenship problems in Israel. Solidarity, which began in 2009, has grown to encompass a more general anger over the occupation. Some years earlier, groups of Israelis began participating in the West Bank Friday protests by Palestinians against the wall, the trajectory of the wall and confiscation of agricultural land, which Sheizaf and his former co-editor Joseph Dana wrote about for this magazine [see “The New Israeli Left,” March 28, 2011]. It was partly that environment that led Sheizaf and the other writers to band together.

They did so with a savvy eye to the medium and to aesthetics: +972 is clean and well designed, liberally sprinkled with video and sharp photography. Witty caricatures of each writer accompany the stories. It is so lovely to look at, the site appears more moneyed than it is, or, rather, it appears the site has some money. It does not; +972 exists almost entirely as a volunteer project, though you’d never know it from the amount and variety of its posts. The art, and the legal aid that keeps it from being sued in the fraught Israeli political environment, is provided entirely pro bono. That last point is important. After the Knesset passed a law last summer banning language that might encourage a boycott of Israel—a crackdown connected to the BDS, or Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement—+972 editors had to insist that their writers never call for boycott, lest the magazine be sued. They couldn’t survive it, financially.

The magazine is structured as a nonprofit, and almost everyone works for free. Until early February it had received only two grants, one from the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Israel (for 6,000
euros) and one from the Social Justice Fund at the New Israel Fund (for $10,000), which enabled some of the editors to travel to the United States and lecture on their cause. They accept donations from readers, and they would like larger grants, as thus far almost no one has received any compensation for their work. As this story went to press the magazine received a one-year, $60,000 grant from the Social Justice Fund, a “one-time investment,” according to fund director Aaron Back, “that can help support the site becoming a sustainable operation,” as well as a $10,000 grant from the Moriah Fund. (That Böll Stiftung grant was attacked by the right-leaning NGO Monitor, which accused the German grant makers of funding a “one-sided” and “distorted” view of the conflict. Böll stood its ground.)

The magazine is hardly beyond criticism. Many mainstream Israeli journalists, including some who write for Haaretz, remain for the most part skeptical. Or they take issue with what they consider +972’s all-or-nothing perspective—in other words, because the occupation is wrong, does that mean the Palestinians are always right? Gershom Gorenberg, a stalwart of the left for decades, is reluctant to criticize the site or its writers. Like others I spoke to, he did not want to appear to be feuding with +972, especially since he supports what it is doing; but he told me, “If you just say ‘This is bad’ and ‘Israel is being bad,’ it’s too easy to slip into the position that doesn’t understand that, well, there’s two sides…. I do think that, historically, there are some really bad things the Palestinians have done and bad choices they’ve made that have contributed to the way things are now. I don’t go along with the idea of relieving them of any responsibility for the situation. As an example, I think that choosing the tactic of suicide bombings in the ’90s, and particularly after 2000, set them back for years and destroyed possible Israeli support for the two-state solution. Should I not say that? Should I stick to the party line? You won’t find much of that perspective in +972.

“The Palestinian problem is a human rights problem disguised as a diplomatic problem; this was Israel’s greatest success, making it look like a geopolitical issue,” Sheizaf told me this past August. We were eating pasta at Pappa’s, a cool, decidedly not kosher little Italian eatery near the open-air Shuk Ha’Carmel in Tel Aviv. “I think one of the reasons I am writing in English,” he said, “is that I fear Jewish American liberals betrayed Israeli liberals. Jewish American liberals are not on our side.

[Most Americans] will only support my liberalism to a certain degree. When I fight for the right of an Arab woman to become a doctor, you will stand by and donate to the New Israel Fund. But if I say ‘Jerusalem is an apartheid city,’ which it is—Jerusalem is the worst place in the world in terms of citizenship laws—American liberals get goosebumps.”

I told him use of the word “apartheid” often just shuts down the conversation. To which he replied, “The problem is that you then shut down reality…. it is important to be in context. I don’t use apartheid just as a slogan. In the West Bank you can say the situation is temporary and there is a Palestinian Authority, but we have annexed Jerusalem and have declared it to be our country forever. But we did not annex the people. Jerusalem has a population, two-thirds of which has every right and one-third without any rights. How is this not apartheid and ethnic segregation? So invent whatever word you want.”

It’s difficult to hear but, for the most part, not strident. Said Scheindlin, “We criticize a lot. It’s a sign of healthy society.” Goldman, a founding editor, said that at the outset “we were looking for an intelligent conversation. Haaretz is a translated product—it is not written originally in English, and it doesn’t cover the West Bank well.” Goldman first arrived in Israel as a liberal and idealistic 17-year-old. “I saw more symmetry in the conflict than I do now.” She covered the 2005 Gaza disengagement, and 2008-09 incursion into Gaza known as Operation Cast Lead, and then started going, week after week, to the West Bank protests. “So +972 is my platform. There is a question—are we influencing anyone? I don’t know.”

In Israel some say the answer is no, or at best, not yet. “I think they are good people with the right motives. I don’t want to sound as if I have something against the people running +972,” said Shmuel Rosner, a blogger and conservative writer. But Rosner, like others I spoke with, doesn’t like the inference in the stories he has read that Israel is always wrong, always “dark,” he said. “I think +972 is not the place to reach people who come to be informed. I think it is a place for people with an already set view to come and be even more convinced that they are right and the other side is wrong. It is group therapy more than information.” Akiva Eldar and liberal feminist writer Merav Michaeli both told me they believe Israelis simply haven’t heard of it, and aren’t reading it. “They are not relevant,” Michaeli said bluntly. In fact, according to the +972 editors, the vast majority of its readers are outside Israel—about 40 percent from the States and only about 20 percent from Israel-Palestine. The rest are scattered around the world, with a healthy number coming from Arab states.

Indeed, in Israel the kind of journalism +972 is doing is difficult, unpopular. And yet the online arm of Channel 2, the major mainstream TV station, chose the site as one of the top blogs of 2011. That’s because the writers were doing hard work before recognition came their way. Take the case of a young woman named Jawaher Abu-Rahmah. In early 2011 Gurvitz, Sheizaf and Goldman wrote story after story showing how Abu-Rahmah’s death was the result of inhaling copious amounts of tear gas at a demonstration in the West Bank town of Bil’in. Sheizaf and Goldman wrote eyewitness accounts; Goldman highlighted how the demonstrations often turn violent, and how tear gas is used liberally, with impunity; and then Gurvitz followed up with a piece about the IDF’s shifting versions of the story. That series, too, was picked up by the New York Times’s Lede Blog. The work was careful, methodical, and +972 didn’t let the story go; it changed how the mainstream media covered it.

“+972,” says the Social Justice Fund’s Aaron Back, a longtime liberal activist in Israel, “is outside the normative paradigm thinking about social life and issues in Israel, but not so ultra-left that you can’t hear them or speak to them. They are challenging to the American reader, but they challenge preconceived notions…in a way that doesn’t make you turn away. That’s not easy to do, and they don’t always hit it every time, but largely they do. That’s a real asset, and that’s something you don’t have sufficiently from Israel.”
The Treason of the Senate

A famous indictment from a century ago aptly describes today’s corrupt legislative body.

by DAVID SARASOHN

It would not have surprised David Graham Phillips that Barack Obama couldn’t get the Senate even to vote on confirming Elizabeth Warren—or anyone else—to head the consumer protection office she had devised. “The Senate is the most powerful part of our public administration. It has vast power in the making of laws,” wrote Phillips in 1906. “It has still vaster power through its ability to forbid the making of laws and in its control over the appointment of the judges who say what the laws mean.”

In a series of articles called “The Treason of the Senate,” which led Theodore Roosevelt to help coin the phrase “muckraking” and helped the drive for the popular election of senators, Phillips argued that senators elected by legislatures represented private interests rather than the voters. He linked the Senate situation to an economic situation that today seems oddly familiar: “That there has been in the past quarter of a century an amazing and unnatural uppiling [his word] of wealth in the hands of a few; that there has been an equally amazing and unnatural descent of the masses, despite skill and industry and the boundless resources of the country…that the massing of wealth and the diffusion of dependence are both swiftly increasing.”

Declared Phillips, “The Senate has always cheerfully voted money for the building of warships, for coast-defense works and heavy armament for the protection of the people of the nation against foreign aggression. But the question now arises: Who is to protect us from the Senate?”

We now elect senators by direct popular vote rather than the vote of state legislatures, thanks to the Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913. But increasingly, the question is the same. In 2012 as in 1906, the Senate is structured to resist the popular will. Today it’s not because of financially manipulable state legislators but because a minority of forty-one senators can and does keep anything from passing or any appointee from being confirmed. The new roadblock is doubly undemocratic considering that, as Senate historian Donald Ritchie points out, several states with a combined 20 percent of the population can elect a majority of the Senate.

It’s an obstruction Phillips might have recognized immediately. “When you have this supermajority barrier,” explains Senator Jeff Merkley, “powerful interests are much better prepared to get something passed because they can do what Wall Street does—hire thousands of lobbyists. Acts for the people are much harder to achieve. You have a situation where people vote for change but it can’t be passed.”

Beyond the Senate’s increasing inability to pass popular legislation, it now resists confirming nominees to carry out existing law. Conventional wisdom in Washington holds that both parties practice obstruction. But as People for the American Way points out, “President Obama’s circuit court nominees have waited an average of 136 days for a vote from the full Senate after approval from the Judiciary Committee, in contrast to an average of 30 days for President Bush’s nominees.” This has produced a 10 percent federal court vacancy rate, with thirty-three designated by the courts as judicial emergencies.

As Ritchie notes, enforcing long delays on votes even for nominees unanimously endorsed by the Judiciary Committee is also “a tactic to let the clock run down so you can’t do anything else.” In Obama’s first Congress, with the Democrats in control of both houses and the White House for the first time since 1994, more than 300 bills passed by the House were never considered by the Senate.

Beyond the filibuster, the Senate also operates on a dramatically expanded system of senatorial holds—some secret, some passed around among members—that allow one senator or several to block action or nominations. Recently Richard Shelby pressured the Obama administration on an issue by putting holds on at least seventy nominations, with no particular objection to any of them. In February 2010 former Senator Jim Bunning set out to single-handedly block an extension of unemployment benefits already accepted by the leaders of both parties; when asked on the floor of the Senate to consider the hardship he was causing the unemployed, Bunning responded, “Tough shit.”

In 2011 Republican senators used the nomination nullification strategy to try to undo existing legislation. They would not permit a vote on any nominee to head the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau unless the law was rewritten, forcing Obama to name Richard Cordray on a recess appointment. They also attempted to put the National Labor Relations Board out of business by blocking appointments needed to create a quorum. “It’s not about the person nominated,” says Merkley; “it’s just hamstringing the law as passed.”

In the 1960s, when the filibuster was mostly used to try to stop civil rights bills, there were only a few cloture votes in each Congress. In the 2007–08 and 2009–10 Senates, the numbers were 112 and ninety-one, respectively. At the beginning of the current Congress, 300 scholars petitioned the Senate, saying, “We, the undersigned, American historians, political scientists, and legal scholars, call upon our senators to restore majority rule to the United States Senate by revising the rules...”
that now require the concurrence of sixty members before legislation can be brought to the floor for debate and restoring majority vote for the passage of bills." One signer, Georgetown history professor Michael Kazin, commented recently about Phillips's book, "In the Progressive Era, there was a sense that senators still had dealings with each other. In a sense, we might be worse off now."

There’s certainly a much greater level of campaign contributions and spending, which fosters intrusiveness and obstruction. A century ago Phillips asked, "Who pays the big election expenses of your congressmen, of the men you send to the legislature to elect senators? Do you imagine those who foot those huge bills are fools? Don’t you know that they are sure of getting their money back, with interest, compound upon compound?"

And that was before television, and before the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision, which opened the gates to corporate funding. In 1906 Phillips actually saw good possibilities in the proposed Tillman bill, which would "prevent corporations from making money contributions in connection with political campaigns." The bill was passed in 1907, but after a century on the books, it was part of the settled legislation attacked by the Court in Citizens United. Shortly after that decision, Justice Clarence Thomas charged, "Tillman was from South Carolina, and as I hear the story he was concerned that the corporations, Republican corporations, were favorable toward blacks and he felt that there was a need to regulate them." While Ben Tillman was indeed a vicious racist, he also hated corporations and railroads. Historians, like his contemporaries, concluded that Tillman’s feelings about corporations and contributions were heavily economic. Phillips considered "honest Ben Tillman" one of the few heroes in the Senate.

But as Phillips noted, in words that fit the Washington of today at least as closely as that of 1906, "How politically careless we have been, how short-memoried, how credulous of words and neglectful of deeds, how easily tricked by cunning appeals to prejudice!"

If we just focus on the specifics of "The Treason of the Senate," it is possible to think our situation now is entirely different. We’re no longer fixated on railroad rates, and our politics doesn’t revolve around the wool tariff. The details of the income tax code, a great obsession of today, weren’t an issue in 1906—there was no income tax until 1913, when the Sixteenth Amendment established it. But Phillips’s fundamental indictment of the Senate as a body structured to protect established wealth by preventing popular legislation and blocking reform-minded nominees has outlived such issues as Oklahoma statehood and colonizing the Philippines. The current acceptance of a supermajority requirement for Senate actions, its use to block or delay confirmation of judicial appointees, and the new strategy of blocking any appointees to authorized government bodies to keep them from functioning can make today’s Senate as undemocratic as the state-legislature-elected, no-conflict-of-interest-rules Senate of 1906.

"Treason," then and now, is a word that makes people nervous. But it’s not hard to see the current operation of the Senate as fundamentally subversive of democratic government. "The most recent obstruction escalation amounts to outright nullification—a partisan assault against republican governance," argues Catholic University law professor Victor Williams. "Scores of critically important federal posts are purposely kept vacant for months and even years; the government is purposely hobbled."

In many ways, the Senate of today doesn’t look all that different from the body observed by David Graham Phillips. "It is easy to see, by observation of the known policy and settled attitude of the Senate,“ wrote the editors of Cosmopolitan magazine in the March 1906 introduction to the series, “that it is not the ninety-nine but merely the one percent that is really represented by that sedate and decorous body."

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Letters

(continued from page 2)

§ adjust and readjust instruction to reflect the needs of individual students.

Simple to describe; devilishly difficult to do. Don’t confuse the issue by trying to solve everything.

GORDON MACINNIS, fellow
The Century Foundation

Rip Up That Pavement Over Paradise!

EUGENE, ORE.

We’ve got to rethink the concept of a “growth economy” and focus on regenerating, renewing, repairing and regrowing. Let’s spend a generation hiring millions for these jobs: build miles of bike and horse paths; replant diversified forests, grasslands and hedgerows; tear down derelict buildings and parking lots and plant urban farms; retrofit all buildings; build light rail and trollies; clean up every creek, stream, river, lake, beach; put solar panels, micro wind and water catchment on all buildings; develop clean energy; modernize water and sewage systems; put power lines underground. We need a Great Renewal. Push for these jobs locally, regionally, nationally, even internationally. They can’t be outsourced. Go to Facebook.com/TheGreatRenewal. We can do this.

VIRGINIA LUBELL

All the News That’s Missed in Print

BROWN DEER, WIS.

I just want to say thanks so very much. I subscribe to your print magazine and online newsletter and find your reporting especially insightful. While reading, I often find myself a tad chagrined because I’m not reading or viewing a similar story in the mainstream media; MSNBC is the exception. All too often everyone else is missing it, ignoring it or deciding against reporting it. Thanks again for what journalism is supposed to be all about. Really.

ROBERT LEO RAMCZYK JR

Corrections

An editor misplaced a quotation in Andy Robinson’s “Marxism at Davos” [Feb. 20]. It was Philip Jennings, not Gerard Lyons, who said, “This isn’t the Magic Mountain, it’s the Great Gatsby revisited.”

Eric Alterman’s February 13 “The Liberal Media” column should have referred to the International Atomic Energy Agency, not “Association.”
A right thumb, a finger, a tooth. These were the contents of a reliquary acquired several years ago by a collector at an auction in Florence. Little did he know that for centuries the remains had been objects of profane devotion. Last seen in 1905, they had been sliced from the corpse of Galileo, along with another finger and a vertebra, during his highly publicized reburial in the Basilica of Santa Croce in 1737 almost 100 years after his death, and preserved in a slender case fashioned of glass and wood and crowned with a carved bust of the scientist. The reliquary’s new owner consulted Galileo experts about his find, and after the authenticity of its contents had been verified he donated it to the Museo Galileo, which is tucked behind the Uffizi in a quiet piazza overlooking the River Arno. (A dentist asked by the museum to examine the tooth concluded that Galileo suffered from gastric acid reflux and ground his teeth in his sleep.) The rediscovered reliquary is displayed adjacent to a smaller one containing Galileo’s other finger, a prized museum possession since 1927. Nearby are several artifacts of Galileo’s scientific genius: a telescope presented to the Medici and the broken objective lens of the original device with which Galileo sighted Jupiter’s four satellites in 1610.

Galileo was not the first scientist whose corpse was as revered as his corpus. That honor belongs to René Descartes, who was reburied numerous times after his death in 1650, initially to secure the return of his body to French soil and subsequently to install him in the pantheon of French genius. Yet Galileo’s remains in Florence have an added meaning. In 1633 the scientist was tried for heresy, having been accused of violating a 1616 papal decree condemning as contrary to Scripture the idea of a heliocentric universe, first described by Copernicus in On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres (1543). The Florentines who snatched a few of Galileo’s bones in 1737 sought to canonize the scientist as a counter-saint, even as the Roman Catholic Church, with a century of hindsight, relented on its decision to deny Galileo a public burial and monument worthy of his fame when he died. Times were changing, but not rapidly enough for Galileo’s most ardent disciples. Their veneration of a few body parts privately commemorated his martyrdom for the cause of science. The church’s interment of his other remains in a sepulcher adjacent to

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Michelangelo’s in Santa Croce designated him a heroic embodiment of Tuscan genius and creativity.

Understanding Galileo has been the task of historians ever since he became a mythical figure. His youngest disciple, Vincenzo Viviani, spent more than half a century trying to get his biography right, never quite managing to meet his own impossibly high expectations of how to write about a great scientist. Bertolt Brecht was so mesmerized by the particulars of Galileo’s life that he wrote three versions of it for the stage, the first while living in Nazi Germany, the second while in postwar America after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the third during his voluntary exile from McCarthy’s America in communist East Berlin. Brecht’s Galileo was simultaneously the victim of a tragedy perpetuated by his society, and the tragedy himself. As Brecht witnessed the evolving role of the scientist in the mid-twentieth century, he began to see similarities between Galileo and J. Robert Oppenheimer, who paid a high price for attempting to work on the Manhattan Project while resisting its core values. In this respect, it may be fairly said that Brecht got Galileo right more than any modern historian in recognizing that he belonged to the ages, and that our perspective on him would be ever changing.

The publication of two recent biographies of Galileo, by John Heilbron and David Wootton, coincided with the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Starry Messenger* (1610), the treatise in which Galileo reported the astronomical observations he had made with the instrument not yet called the telescope. Heilbron, a distinguished historian of physics and mathematics, has spent many years studying the relations between science and religion, including how the Roman Catholic Church stimulated and materially supported a research program of Catholic astronomy. Wootton has previously written on the history of atheism and unbelief, and about Galileo’s controversial Venetian friend Paolo Sarpi—a theologian and tireless critic of the papacy. In Venice there is a statue of Fra Paolo in Campo Santa Fosca commemorating his survival of a botched assassination attempt in October 1607. The cutthroats were sheltered and paid by Rome, yet Sarpi continued to defend freedom of thought and belief, both in conversation and in print, and to discuss science with Galileo. In Heilbron’s account, Galileo is a versatile connoisseur and critic; in Wootton’s, he is all but a modern scientist without faith.

Before the appearance of *Starry Messenger*, Galileo was known as a poorly dressed, occasionally sarcastic and mechanically adroit college dropout who kept a mistress and had sired three illegitimate children. He admired and imitated the prose of Dante, Machiavelli and Ariosto; he enjoyed reading poetry and liked to tell and retell a good joke. He learned a fair bit of music from his father, Vincenzo Galilei, a Medici court musician, yet rebelled against his father’s desire that he become a physician. He frequently quarreled with his mother, Giulia Ammannati, who seems to have thought that a session with the Florentine Inquisitors might curb her son’s insolence. Wootton makes these fraught familial relations the basis of his depiction of Galileo as a proud, stubborn and sensitive man, a portrait reminiscent of Arthur Koestler’s 1959 account of Galileo as an anti-hero. But Wootton overreaches when he makes some imaginative and not particularly well-substantiated hypotheses about a third (illegitimate) daughter and a late-blooming love affair.

In his formative years Galileo cultivated a highly fertile geometric imagination that would nourish his study of mathematics and physics, and especially mechanics. His invention, when he was in his 20s, of a lightweight hydrostatic balance earned him the admiration of senior mathematicians in Italy. Heilbron lovingly explores Galileo’s resourcefulness by explaining, recalculating and diagramming all his most important insights into the nature of things. This work has been done piecemeal by other historians of science, but it is Heilbron’s accomplishment to have created a complete, accessible yet technical synthesis of Galileo’s findings. Such reading is not for the mathematically faint of heart, but it is essential for understanding Galileo’s science. By integrating this material into a sharp-witted and ironic narrative of Galileo as a man of culture and learning, Heilbron portrays Galileo as a child of the Renaissance, a man who saw the lunar mountains not only through the lens of his telescope and by the point of his compass but also in the context of Ariosto’s fantastic descriptions of them in *Orlando Furioso*.

In 1589 Galileo became a mathematics professor—no degree was required for the sixteenth-century version of this job—first in Pisa (1589–92) and then in Padua (1592–1610), though he was never fully comfortable with university life. Wootton presents Galileo’s years in the Venetian Republic as the period when his best work ripened, even if he had yet to enjoy the international celebrity and recognition that would come with his triumphant return to Florence in 1610. Galileo had a lot of fascinating ideas but virtually no publications or discoveries of any particular significance to his name; his meager salary was devoted by bills. But he did have ambitions. In Venice he received a patent for a horse-driven pump, but nothing came of it. Like all good seventeenth-century astronomers, he cast horoscopes (the Paduan Inquisitors who investigated new charges against him in 1604 found this activity benign because he did not prognosticate the future). He taught, and talked with his Venetian friends.

Eventually Galileo’s efforts began to pay off. Between 1597 and 1604 he perfected a geometric and military compass—a versatile sector with which to calculate interest and exchange rates, extract square roots, measure volumes and distances, and design to scale. He ran out of town an ex-student who had tried to plagiarize a pamphlet he sold to students to supplement his income. The next year he won a plum assignment teaching mathematics to the Medici prince who, as Grand Duke Cosimo II, would become an important patron.

In 1609–10 the world changed for Galileo. Drawing on reports of a Dutch spyglass that magnified things at a distance, he made a powerful observational instrument through which new data poured from the heavens. He rushed to publish *The Starry Messenger*, which earned him a substantial raise and a new position with no teaching responsibilities at the Medici court in Florence. He revealed to people the craters and valleys of the moon, the many stars of Orion’s belt and the Milky Way; he named the four satellites of Jupiter the Medicina stars in honor of his most important patron. He won the admiration of the German mathematician and astrologer Johannes Kepler and eventually convinced skeptical astronomers such as the renowned Jesuit mathematician Christopher Clavius that he had found novelties in the heavens.

Galileo’s writings about his spectacular celestial discoveries made him justly famous as a

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**Books Discussed in This Essay**

**Galileo**

*By John L. Heilbron. Oxford. 508 pp. $34.95.*

**Galileo**

*Watcher of the Skies.*

*By David Wootton. Yale. 328 pp. $35.*

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pioneer of modern science. They also delayed by more than a quarter-century the publication of *Two New Sciences* (1638), an account of his fundamental insights into the physical world. Its ideas are commemorated every time a high school physics class does experiments with inclined planes and pendulums, or charts the parabolic path of a projectile, or discusses the problem of inertia and the acceleration of falling bodies.

A crucial question for Galileo's biographers has been how a mathematical physicist became the brilliant observational astronomer and advocate of a new and increasingly controversial cosmology. In Wootton's reconstruction Galileo turned Copernican in Padua between 1592 and 1597, when his reading of the Polish polymath's *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, among other works, made him realize that the physics of motion and the question of a moving earth were interrelated problems. Drawing on Sarpi's unpublished notebooks to cede drop on the theologian's conversations with Galileo, Wootton makes the case that Galileo began aspects of his controversial *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632), especially his theory that tides were a product of the earth's movements, as early as 1592. The nature of the freewheeling and philosophically probing conversations that occurred in the Venetian Republic is essential to Wootton's argument, because it was in this environment that Galileo first opened his mind to new and daring ideas.

Heilbron agrees that this period of Galileo's life was crucial to his refutation of geocentrism but is not convinced that it was more important than his experiences before 1592 or during the fertile period of 1610–15, when he returned to Florence and found allies in Rome, including the young aristocrat Federico Cesi, who enthusiastically admitted Galileo to his Academy of the Lynxes and began to underwrite the cost of Galileo's publications. Heilbron provisionally dates the origins of Galileo's Copernican sympathies to his time in Pisa, and points to his later reading of Kepler's brilliant and imaginative synthesis of astronomy, physics and mathematics, *The Cosmic Mystery* (1596), as an experience that led him to consider the full complexities of celestial motions.

Wootton's Galileo has a churlish theoretical mind focused on understanding first principles. Heilbron's Galileo is restless and pragmatic—always on the move, in conversation with many people, hedging his bets. Both portraits have their merits. Wootton is right to present Sarpi as the ghost in the machine, bringing Galileo news of the Dutch spyglass from an associate in Paris, witnessing Galileo's observations of Jupiter and worrying that Galileo lacked Kepler's refined understanding of optical theory. Galileo's Venetian friends understandably felt betrayed upon hearing of his decision to defect to Florence after having pocketed plenty of Venetian ducats to build a new and improved telescope. They warned him that Florence was too near Rome—and the Vatican—and that Rome could never be as tolerant of his scientific investigations as Venice. With hindsight, they understood Galileo perhaps better than he understood himself.

Heilbron demonstrates how Galileo adroitly developed a new way of writing about science in a prose style of such suppleness that it is still taught in Italian schools. In the university towns of Italy, Galileo and his friends had laughed at those philosophers who still wore togas, declaimed venerable old truths in hoary Latin and seemed disconnected from the new realities of the physical world. The Medici Grand Duke supported Galileo, and his Roman patron Cesi encouraged him to debate his opponents. A youthful and admiring cardinal of Florentine origin named Maffeo Barberini wrote poetry about Galileo's discoveries. When he became Pope Urban VIII in 1623, everyone agreed that his poetry was sublime. When he had Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* confiscated and prohibited, and its author tried for heresy, condemned and placed under permanent house arrest from 1633 until his death in 1642, people ceased to talk about his paean to science.

Heilbron and Wootton carefully reconstruct the events leading up to Galileo's trial, beginning with the uneasy climate of 1615, when Florentine Dominicans accused Galileo and his followers of unorthodox beliefs and made known their discontent about Galileo's friendship with Fra Paolo. Wootton argues that the accusations were probably true, a claim that adds ballast to his case for presenting Galileo as an unbeliever rather than a good, if imprudent, Catholic. Heilbron reminds us that the Medici Grand Duke personally certified Galileo's status as an observant Catholic, quoting Galileo's statements about the purity of his intent and the Venetian ambassador's description of Galileo in Rome as a changed man who frequently took Communion. He also notes that several years after the Vatican's 1616 condemnation of Copernicus, Galileo took a pilgrimage to Loreto to make a votive offering at the Virgin's shrine in the hope that his health would improve. Heilbron's Galileo becomes ever more Catholic in light of mounting questions about his piety and orthodoxy. By contrast, Wootton's Galileo is another Sarpi (or possibly a precursor of David Hume), going through the motions of faith to save his skin while waiting for the right moment to unleash a radically naturalistic account of miracles that would further rationalize, if not topple, Christian faith.

How to explain this divergence? In his desire to make a strong argument about Galileo's relationship to faith, Wootton transforms a few opaque phrases in Galileo's correspondence into a lost treatise on miracles that makes his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*—Galileo's famous 1615 manifesto declaring science and religion to be separate but complementary truths—sound like the product of a pious but misspent youth. According to Wootton, Galileo's experiences of 1615–16 radicalized his soul. Put in a different way, he rediscovered his inner Venetian while conforming outwardly to Roman appearance.

Galileo would have been in good company wearing such masks. Heilbron reminds us that Sarpi described himself in just these dualities. But in Heilbron's portrait Galileo is not so subtle or cunning in his actions. He is instead a scientific Don Quixote, charging forward where no one ought to tread. Galileo did not shy away from seeking material comfort from the church. In 1630, as he put the finishing touches on his long-awaited *Dialogue*, he began to wear a clerical tonsure and to recite the Divine Office in order to reap the benefits of a church pension his son had neglected to take up. Its monetary value would be reduced in 1633 by the irascible Barberini pope. None of these outwardly pious acts are proof that Galileo was a spiritually devout man. Yet throughout his life he was surrounded by clerical friends and disciples; not every Catholic scientist in religious orders was Galileo's enemy, and there were many different ways to be a Catholic in good standing.

While Galileo cannot be transformed into a saint—though Heilbron cannot resist comparing Galileo's modern rehabilitation by the Roman Catholic Church to the process of canonization—he should not be seen as a mirror image of Sarpi, let alone the second coming of the radical cosmologist, theosophist and Catholic martyr Giordano Bruno, whose death in 1600 atop a funeral pyre lit by the Roman Inquisition was sung into popular memory. Galileo certainly read Bruno's dialogues, borrowed aspects of his witty theatrical style of writing and carefully avoided any discussion of the plurality of worlds, gods and souls, subjects that got
Bruno burned. But he was not trying to rewrite faith, though in retrospect his *Letter to the Grand Duchess* became the basis for a new approach to the relationship between knowledge and faith. He was an accidental theologian trying to advance science.

Galileo’s day of ignominy came on June 22, 1633. Standing before the inquisitors in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, dressed in white penitential robes, he was forced to deny the validity of belief in the earth’s motion, an idea he had advocated for more than two decades. The Special Commission appointed by Urban VIII to review accusations against Galileo after the publication of his *Dialogue* spent less than two months investigating his crimes before reaching a decision. For the next 359 years the Roman Catholic Church would keep revisiting and revising the meaning of Galileo’s trial.

Galileo’s friend the pope had very clear ideas about the circumstances under which he would permit Galileo to write favorably about heliocentrism. They discussed the issue at length in 1630 during Galileo’s trip to Rome. Galileo seems to have followed the literal spirit of the pope’s message without getting the point. He could never forget that Urban VIII, as a cardinal involved in the 1616 Inquisition proceedings, had thought that the condemnation of Bruno’s book and the effect on the opinions of his followers had been a mistake.

Like the demented, wandering knight of Ariosto’s epic poem and the bumbling Don Quixote, Galileo did not stop to reflect on how the former cardinal, who had written a poem in praise of him after the 1616 condemnation and called him brother, would now view his situation as the pope. As it turned out, Urban VIII felt betrayed when presented with the official inquisitorial record of Galileo’s conversation with the learned and pious Cardinal Robert Bellarmine about the limitations the church planned to impose upon Galileo’s ability to teach, hold or defend in any way Copernican astronomy, an exchange that had occurred just before Rome’s decree against heliocentrism was made public. Galileo had not only misinterpreted the pope’s personal wishes but disobeyed the Inquisition by not disclosing the nature of this conversation during the long negotiations preceding the publication of his *Dialogue*. Galileo’s enemies in Florence and Rome finally had a legitimate platform for their pointed criticisms, which they repeated mercilessly. Galileo never published a book in Italy again. Chastened and publicly humiliated but still insisting that he was a good Catholic, he spent the final nine years of his life under house arrest at his country villa in Arcetri, where he was periodically reminded by visiting inquisitors not to talk with anyone about Copernican astronomy. He completed *Two New Sciences*, a work of mechanics that secured his reputation as the founder of modern experimental physics in 1638; that same year he went blind after decades of telescope gazing. Galileo published *Two New Sciences* in the Netherlands. His *Dialogue* remained on the Vatican’s Index of Prohibited Books until 1835.

Was belief in Copernicanism actually a heresy? Wootton thinks it was, because he sees it as an idea strongly associated with other known heresies and largely advocated by people whose religious views were otherwise suspect. Heilbron characteristically teases out the complexity of the issue, siding with recent research that characterizes the Vatican’s sentencing of Galileo as the result of a compromise between two different positions within the Special Commission that decided his fate. They made Galileo a vehemently suspected heretic of an unspecified heresy. He had been punished for playing with fire, yet it was unclear whether anyone else harboring these ideas would suffer the same consequences. In fact, no one did.

The specter of Galileo haunts conversations about science and religion to the present day. In a Republican primary debate in September 2011, Texas Governor Rick Perry compared his skepticism about global warming and climate change theory to the unpopular stance taken by Galileo in the face of church criticism. But Perry is no scientist, nor does his position carry the same consequences. In fact, no one did.

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“The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer.”
—James Baldwin
*The Nation.* July 11, 1966

“We let men take wealth which is not theirs; if the seizure is ‘legal’ we call it high profits and the profiteers help decide what is legal.”—W.E.B. Du Bois
*The Nation.* October 20, 1956

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A Child of Sleepwalkers
by LORNA SCOTT FOX

For Gregor von Rezzori, who died in 1998, Europe “committed suicide” in 1914, the year he was born. Von Rezzori’s whole oeuvre is a gay, merciless, tragic reflection on Europe’s decomposition, a process in which World War II and the Holocaust are hardly more than an after-shock, following which the old continent’s ways of life disintegrate into techno-abstract homogeneity. “We’re a rotten people; our culture is rotten,” he insisted in an interview. Von Rezzori began writing in earnest only in 1940, as if he thought that from then on there was little left to do but remember and reflect on the catastrophe. In his many books, the most enduring of which are autobiographical fictions, he expresses scant interest in the times he was living through; “Pravda,” a story from 1979, alludes to his glamorous days as a screenwriter in the 1950s and ‘60s, but even this tale is engrossed with an older history. Von Rezzori’s great theme is the darkening world of Central Europe between the wars. The paradox is that as Europe’s remains are gnawed away by fascism, the books’ narrators, likewise born around 1914, are just starting out in life; these contrary arcs set vitality and decay to fizzing together like a cabaret cocktail.

The narrators are loosely based on the author, forming a composite singularity with as many outlines as a Giacometti figure. Only the “I” of von Rezzori’s The Death of My Brother Abel (1976) is not an alter ego, and although that massive novel dwells on the ersatz character of postwar Europe, it’s still marked by the ripples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s destruction and the corruption of sustaining myths. The three volumes published by NYRB Classics—An Ermine in Czernopol (1958), Memoirs of an Anti-Semite (1979) and The Snows of Yesterday (1989), the first having just appeared—are worth reading chronologically to sample different incarnations of the same fanciful boy and adolescent, and his later dilettante drift. To arrive at the last book, a straight family memoir divided into portraits, is like bumping into recurrent fictional characters in a factual, “real” space—only to find these people just as captivating as the fun-house-mirror reflections we’d met before.

Von Rezzori’s father was an Italo-Austrian nobleman, proficient in chemistry and the arts, with a sinecure in Bukovina, where after 1919, when the region passed to Romania, he pretended to uphold a teetering bastion of civilization but really stayed on for the hunting. A “pathological” anti-Semite but too snobbish to be a Nazi, contemptuous of the Anschluss for being a vile Prussianization of the ideal of Greater Germany, he was also a rough-edged life force, more interesting and more loved than his fictional counterparts. Von Rezzori’s mother was a period type: wan, over-refined, disenchanted. His older sister—tougher than the equally doomed Tanya in Ermine—was a rival for the affections of their father, who, in von Rezzori’s opinion, died early from a terminal case of their mother’s “princess in rags” complex. The fascinating but démodé clan was counterbalanced by a primeval nanny and a cultivated governess, whose portraits bookend Ermine. For von Rezzori, artistry, understanding and growth were the gifts of these outsiders.

Cassandra, the illiterate, dwarfish peasant from the Carpathians who was the young Gregor Arnulf Hilarius’s wet nurse and nanny, raised him with the rigor and imagination his mother lacked. Even more important than Cassandra’s cheerfulness and feel for earth, life and death, was her peculiar linguistic genius. “Each second or third word was either Ruthenian, Romanian, Polish, Russian, Armenian or Yiddish, not to forget Hungarian and Turkish.” The boy was fed ancient fairy tales flecked with “scurrilous verbal creations, word-changelings, semantic homunculi,” morsels the writer stored up—not only in his sensitivity to the mongrel heritages of Eastern Europe and language itself but in various Cassandra-like characters and the raucous folk-world of Tales of Maghrebinia, a series of once-popular books based on the stories von Rezzori told on the Berlin radio after the war.

When the boy outgrew Cassandra, his moral education continued under Bunchy,
A drama in his hour of greatness.

At first this duality seems central: von Rezzori’s belief in essences leads him to plot the nature and interaction of different populations with endless subtlety, like a taxonomist or a naturalist, in contrast to his romantic treatment of personal transformation. But it’s really a continuum. Characters can change only as their nature allows. In the words of the wise headmistress of the school the children attend (until the family realize it’s Jewish): “In the best case their characters can be fostered. You can’t implant anything, you can’t develop anything that isn’t already inside them.” Where social or ethnic groups are concerned, this sense of predetermination results in stereotyping. Von Rezzori’s peasants are dim but crafty; his radicals, heartlessly cerebral. A catalog of conventional types always underwrites the operation of myths and fables, from primeval fireside tales to Aesop to Magrebimia.

Thus the Jewish children and adults at the school confirm certain caricatures, and the narrator even remarks on it; yet the sudden human contact with this mystified otherness makes him question his family’s anti-Semitism, an “educated” blend of disdain and burlesque. Besides, not only are the Jewish kids deeper and more worldly than he; they possess another—tellingly aristocratic—virtue: “the superiority of an older race.” When the Jewish football team trounces the pro-German Romanian one, and the post-match brawl turns into a citywide pogrom, the narrator cheers on his new heroes:

From the darkness of the chestnut trees...a troop emerged and fell upon the plundering mob like a flock of avenging angels. They were muscular young men dressed in white linen pants covered with flour; their shirts were open, and their heads were covered in little visorless felt caps—apprentices from the numerous kosher bakeries.... And leading them into battle was a Jewish Mars, a stout god of war...his fat face flushed red like David when he became a man.... It was Dr. Salzmann [their mild, tolerant religion teacher] in his hour of greatness.

The novel’s analysis of the psychology of prejudice does not hinge on the simple matter of redemption, of turning “bad” stereotypes into good, the “humble” into the martial. True to his belief that people can’t really change, von Rezzori shows with riveting, agonized panache, and from within the subjectivity of his narrators, that if you’ve had a certain upbringing, no matter what you think, feel or do, you are
eaner and funnier than An Ermine in Czernopol—more Nabokov than Musil—Memoirs of an Anti-Semite presents itself as “A Novel in Five Stories.” All but the last are set in four successive periods, from about 1927 to 1938. Each narrator speaks in the voice of the familiar “I” who shares much of the author’s background and biography, along with hisbeckless temperament and vacillating sense of identity. With slightly different trajectories and experiences, they remain callow despite growing older, indeed more suave and superficial, as calamity approaches. Each story revolves around an encounter with Jews that the protagonist experiences as averagely annoying, humiliating or good fun; only the reader knows how little time remains.

In “Skushno,” 13-year-old Bubi, expelled from his Styrian boarding school for “inability to learn,” is staying with relatives in the country near Czernowitz. Mincing ridiculously around the woods clad in an imitation of an old German drinking-fraternity costume (he is going through a Sturm und Drang phase, thrilled by the “bitterness of anticipated futility” in those masculine songs), Bubi is befriended by Wolf, a tough, rude Jewish doctor’s son who is also a brilliant pianist. Wolf tramples cheerfully over Bubi’s romanticism, forcing him to see the lewdness around him and mocking the stupidity of the goyim, until the boy takes a half-meant, cowardly revenge.

“Skushno” is followed by “Youth,” set in 1933 Bucharest, where an adolescent on the cusp of adulthood is prey to lust, insecurity and high-flown fancies about himself. He becomes a cosmetics salesman, a lowly job that nevertheless provides passage into the city’s exotic neighborhoods, where he seduces Gypsy girls and imbibes the Orient at Mr. Garabetian’s Armenian bazaar (all the author’s prototypes are primarily watchers, the perfect position for the writer that “I” never is). He falls for a middle-aged Jewish shopkeeper, when at the first tentative clinch he notes “the sudden transformation of an age-old fear into joy…. This change in her face was what made me love her.” He worships the ancient suffering she embodies—until he hits her in public, exasperated by her petty-bourgeois airs. He thereby loses both her and the respect of the working-class characters he was flattered to know: he has been identified not as a lofty soul but as a member of “a caste that blemished me, as though I were Jewish.” Von Rezzori shows the merged mechanisms of class and race as too ingrained and shape-shifting to be overcome. “Löwinger’s Rooming House” performs a similar operation with sex and race in late-1930s Vienna, as Nazism gains ground among the sort of people who can’t decide whether “Jewesses” are Jews or common bitches.

The third story is “Truth,” which briefly made von Rezzori’s name when it appeared in The New Yorker in 1969. A lot happens in flashback. There’s another whirl through that inexhaustible childhood and its contradictory heritages, here developed in the light of the schism between the two Roman Empires. A harsh portrait of the parents is accompanied by the narrator’s startling anti-Semitic rant, deploring for instance the way upstart rich Jews change their names as camouflage for “their repulsive social climbing.” (The proud or the submissive sort are no better; hatred precedes its justifications.) While reproducing some of his parents’ opinions, the narrator tries to snub them by embracing identities they’d scorn—Romanian or Turkish. Interleaved with these vignettes is the tale of his friendship with Jewish Minka, a happy flapper who lives upstairs in his grandmother’s building in Vienna. When he is 17 she brings him to bed, more as a toy than a boyfriend, and the affair remains tender and uncomplicated for years, because “there was a taboo that controlled my feelings.” He is even rescued from his defiant provincialism by Minka’s circle of Jewish artists and bohemians: “That little kingdom of hers, which became my universe, was composed of all that was best in Vienna in the early 1930s, the most intellectual and most amusing.”

It seems contradictory, but that’s the point. One feeling does not prevent another where Jews are concerned. As events gather pace in the Reich, Salzburg “was just awful. It was overrun with Jews. The worst of them had come from Germany as refugees and, in spite of their luggage-laden Mercedes cars, behaved as if they were the victims of a cruel persecution.” By 1938 even carefree Minka is worried. “Oh, don’t exaggerate, I said. ‘You Jews are always making a fuss about something.’ The honesty of this tale precludes the smallest moment of self-redemptive remorse.

The final story, “Pravda,” unfolds in the third person and is set much later, as a feverish retrospection involving judgments and excuses. In her introduction to Memoirs of an Anti-Semite, Deborah Eisenberg asks, “Who is this ‘he’; this other, whom life has made us? When did we split off from ourselves, and…our received view of things?” The answer is surely when the war and the Final Solution got going. The elderly man walking down Via Veneto in 1979 rummages desperately through his guilty recollections, in search of the fragments of disconnected lives that were necessarily unreal, as his parents’ values were already obsolete in 1918: he is “a child of sleepwalkers—growing up in a dreamed world, sometimes nightmarish…predetermined to lose every kind of reality.” Again, he is at once a literary creation and a version of the real von Rezzori, so that when the character admits that self-reinvention has allowed him to dodge any “out-and-out collision with reality,” we think of the author’s self-reinventions in art, too. And when von Rezzori wonders that “perhaps what allows him to feel unalterably himself is also his perpetual changing,” he has foregrounded the fluctuating “I”s of the books. But ambiguous consistency is no answer to Pilate’s question. The Jewish encounter here is fittingly, then, a case of fiction within fiction.

The narrator met his “second, Jewish wife” at a nouvelle vague film shoot. She was nominally Jewish; she was more imbued with Catholic culture, and had survived the war thanks to the devotion of an SS man who saw her as “the very model of a German girl.” But as soon as a child arrived, she and the narrator began helplessly to invent each other according to ancestral habit, as the drama-queen Jew and the inconstant goy. They taunted each other in “theologically” arguments over truth, she playing the authentic, the literalist, the absolutist; he, the ironical aesthete. After the divorce, they fought over what was to be the spiritual heritage of their child. “No, it was good that the boy had died early”; he would have been destroyed by the contentions re-created by this apparently enlightened couple out of thin air. The two “races” had become mirror images of each other’s irreducibility.

In 1986 von Rezzori published an essay in Vanity Fair about following the tracks of Humbert Humbert. He confessed to loving the motels and highways of Lolitaland, deeming their ahistorical plasticity the very core of America. It was an imaginative alternative to Old Europe, which had been destroyed by the logic of its nature long ago.
SHELF LIFE

by JORDAN DAVIS

THEY COME IN WAVES, THE BOOKS IN which experts, so-called, attempt to redeem poetry for the general audience, whatever that is. The impulse is understandable, as poetry is truly a marginal activity, but the idea of a one-book solution for a symptom of cultural decline is ludicrous. Generally, publishers and authors are in on the joke of treating poetry’s strangeness as a problem rather than a saving grace. And yet, and therefore, the handbooks keep rolling in.

David Orr, an attorney whose poetry reviews appear often in The New York Times Book Review, has entered the discussion, but his contribution is more of the same rather than a clarifying riposte. In Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry (Harper; $23.99), he takes a calisthenic view of poetry: it’s not too strenuous but better at elevating the mental equivalent of cardio levels than, say (though he wouldn’t say it), parts of the Times. It has looked for the past twenty years as though the only people left in the country interested in poetry are professors and poets; the art could use more independent auditors. Orr has published a few poems, and however one might react to his critical portfolio of likes and dislikes, he gives no reason to believe he is subliminally campaigning for his own work.

Beautiful and Pointless is frustrating in argument, example and style. Used selectively, deflating remarks can keep a dry subject lively. Poetry is seldom dry enough, though, and anyway Orr is not selective; the steady drip of ingratiating jokes suggests insecurity. Robert Hass’s poem “Bush’s War” makes him especially anxious. The poem’s drift from wanting to say something about the invasion of Iraq to commentary on German landscape, cuisine and literature prompts apt questions and evasive sarcasm from Orr—“For whom is this poem intended? What is it hoping to achieve? And how can we get our hands on some of that asparagus?” Some answers: the poem is intended for Americans; Hass diagnoses a collective guilt-induced amnesia, illustrating how any culture can slide into barbarism and aggression. As for the asparagus, if it’s what you’ve been paying attention to, you’ve proved Hass’s point.

There’s a better critic in Orr struggling to get out. He identifies the mediocrity of most contemporary poetry—the neglect of form, the glorification of poetic fashions—but rather than diagnose and prescribe, he apologizes for the intrusion. Chalk it up to the small-t times—just as elsewhere in the country, Orr looks straight at the problem and chooses not to do anything to fix it, preferring to minimize and gloss it over. It’s right there in the title. The beautiful part is promising; the reverse psychology of the pointless, not so much.

On the subject of his own seduction by poetry, that of Philip Larkin’s, and in the brief memoir concerning his father’s stroke and the poetry he read to him afterward, Orr is quite good. What Beautiful and Pointless suggests Orr needs is an interlocutor who also knows something about poetry and can help keep him on topics he knows and cares about. Someone to remind him to take courage. On his own, Orr lacks nerve.

KENNETH GOLDSMITH Suffers NO such chutzpah deficit. A sculptor and former creative director in advertising, Goldsmith has emerged as the un-leader of the conceptual poets, a mutually-assured-relevance cohort that takes its cues from the conceptual artists of forty years back. Sample Goldsmith titles include the radio transcriptions Traffic, The Weather and Sports; the poet owes his notoriety to Day, a repackaging in book form of a single issue of the New York Times. As Goldsmith will be the first to tell you, these texts are reductions to absurdity of the practices of Andy Warhol, John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. Something of the source lives on in the copy of the copy; presented as poetry, the books are elegant and superfluous and far from the worst ways available to ruin your eyesight.

Uncreative Writing (Columbia; $22.95), Goldsmith’s first essay collection, is superfluous and inelegant. It begins with a noncontroversial premise, that the recent history of art is a progression from the trace of the movement of the human hand to ever-more-sophisticated reuses of existing images. When he’s providing exposition, Goldsmith is as solid as you would expect the curator of the encyclopedic avant-garde Internet library UbuWeb to be. When he tries to extrapolate a future direction for writing from that history, he deserves to be laughed at, not with: “Earlier, I focused on the enormity of the Internet, the amount of the language it produces, and what impact this has upon writers. In this chapter I’d like to extend that idea and propose that, because of this new environment, a certain type of book is being written that’s not meant to be read as much as it’s meant to be thought about.”

Setting aside the basic problems with the prose—the misuse of “enormity,” the confusion of agency, the unclear references—there’s a basic problem with the concept. This notional book he describes might well be sold as a bill of goods. Goldsmith cites Sol LeWitt’s instructions for drawings as precedent: big mistake, as LeWitt’s achievement rests not on the textual descriptions of his works but on what he gives us to look at.

Goldsmith relies on a remark of William Burroughs’s collaborator Brion Gysin—that writing is fifty years behind the visual arts—to support his modest proposal to replace creative writing classes with exercises in plagiarism. As satire it’s OK, but as coursework it would be unnervingly close to academic fraud. Then again, if you wrote sentences like Goldsmith’s, you’d advocate for plagiarism too.
Berlusconiland
by YASCHA MOUNK

The television and newspaper baron Silvio Berlusconi officially entered Italian politics in January 1994. Exploiting the convulsions among the political class caused by a nationwide corruption investigation known as mani pulite (clean hands), Berlusconi introduced himself to Italians as a self-made man who would end double-dealing and modernize Italy's economy. Three months later voters gave his Forza Italia party a majority in government, making him prime minister.

But before long, Berlusconi's image as a courageous reformer suffered one setback after another. There were his glaring conflicts of interest (as prime minister, he had considerable power over public television, his networks' sole competitor). There were his ongoing troubles with the law (allegations of bribery, false accounting, tax fraud, embezzlement and child prostitution) and his brazen sex scandals. There was, too, the fact that the three governments over which he presided—1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006, 2008 to 2011—fell spectacularly short of the lavish promises he made. When Berlusconi first became prime minister, Italy had the sixth largest economy in the world. Its GDP per capita was comparable to that of Britain. Today, even though its economy is struggling, Britain is far richer than Italy, where the GDP per capita is roughly on par with Spain's. Nor is an end to Italy's economic misery in sight. Even if Mario Monti's government of technocrats can somehow defuse the sovereign debt crisis it inherited when a faltering parliamentary majority and unprecedented unpopularity forced Berlusconi to resign in November, the country's structural problems have become so grave that the Italian economy is unlikely to return to healthy levels of growth for years.

Given the depths of Italy's stagnation, Berlusconi's long hold over the country is truly puzzling. How, despite his poor track record, could Berlusconi have persuaded Italians to make him prime minister three times? And what are the defining features of Berlusconiland, the bizarre country he created during nearly two decades of unrivaled power and cultural influence? In The Liberty of Servants, Maurizio Viroli, an Italian political theorist who teaches at Princeton University, offers a surprising answer to these questions: Berlusconi was able to stay in power because he transformed Italy from a republic into a kind of royal court.

The royal court seems to be a strange metaphor for the country Italy has become. Our image of royalty is shaped by some mixture of Elizabeth II, Frederick the Great and Louis XIV; Berlusconi hasn't a regal bone in his body. Viroli is aware of these differences of style and lineage, but his definition of court life doesn't grant them much relevance. For him, a court system, far from being defined by the traditional trappings of royalty, is any arrangement of power whereby “one man is placed above and at the center of a relatively large number of individuals—his courtiers—who depend on him to gain and preserve wealth, status, and reputation.” Viroli calls the person at the center of the court system the signore. Even if it weren't for the uncanny association with the droit du seigneur, it is clear why the label fits Berlusconi. Viroli is hardly exaggerating when he states that over the past few decades, “all of Italy's political life has rotated around Silvio Berlusconi: all eyes turn to him, all thoughts, hopes, and fears.” He quickly became such a polarizing figure that the gulf between Italy's left and right, which had been huge and vicious during much of Italy's postwar history, has shrunk. What mattered most for Italians during his reign was whether one was for or against Berlusconi. In the summer of 2010, for example, several politicians on the left were prepared to fawn over Gianfranco Fini, a longtime fascist with center-right views, simply because he had broken with Berlusconi and spoken in public about his opposition to the prime minister.

Berlusconi not only made himself the Sun King of Italian politics; he acted like a Mafia don. At his word, pretty teenage girls became TV presenters, TV presenters ascended to the rank of government ministers and government ministers were offered lucrative jobs in various industries once they left office. As Viroli's description of court life suggests, Berlusconi tried to persuade Italians of his superiority by using every possible opportunity to flaunt his vast private fortune or to compare himself to historical figures such as Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ.

For Viroli, Berlusconiland was more than a corrupt court. Drawing on republicanism, a long-neglected tradition of political thought that has recently been revived by intellectual historians and political theorists like John Pocock, Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, Viroli argues that Berlusconi's corrosive influence has deprived Italians of their liberty. On Viroli's account, philosophers who stand in the liberal tradition worry only about actual interference with a person's actions. “A Free-Man,” wrote Thomas Hobbes with his characteristic crispness, “is he that, in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to doe what he has a will to.” The subjects of a benevolent despot remain perfectly free so long as he does not inhibit their actions. Viroli argues that according to such a liberal conception of freedom, Berlusconi's Italy remained a free country: “If we can rightly point to violations of liberty only in cases where fundamental civil and political rights are suppressed by force, then we Italians are, generally speaking, a free people.”

Yet for Viroli, the liberal definition of freedom, with its exclusive emphasis on freedom from interference, is too anemic. He worries that a ruler with vast, arbitrary power would have a chilling effect on the freedoms of his subjects even if he never chose to exercise his power. To emphasize this point, republicans such as Viroli like to cite the example of Tranio, the protagonist of a comedy by the Roman playwright Plautus. Tranio is a slave. But because his master is often absent, and because he is so wily, no one ever interferes with his actions. As long as he continues to flatter and manipulate his master, he is free to do as he pleases. And yet, the republicans point out, a slave is surely the very opposite of a “free man.”

While slavery is now officially banned throughout the world, Viroli argues that the most salient characteristic of slavery—the relation of domination and dependence between master and slave—persists in a milder form in our societies. “Citizens who can be tossed into prison arbitrarily by the police,”

Yascha Mounk, a doctoral candidate in government at Harvard University, is an editor of The Utopian.
for example, stand in just such a relation of dependence to an oppressive, dominating power. Even if, for now, they nominally remain at liberty, they lack real freedom. In the case of Italy, though Berlusconi never used his vast power to interfere with the lives of Italian citizens, they knew that he could, at any moment, choose to do so. This lack of real freedom, Virolı argues, limited the things Italians dared to do as well as the words they dared to say.

Virolı’s account of the theory of republican liberty is attractive, but his argument that Italians were, in his own sense, unfree is not convincing. Some Italians did find themselves in a true position of dependence on Berlusconi’s whims. Journalists at the networks and newspapers he controlled knew that one honest sentence could make the difference between a lucrative job and the dole. In a country where even many junior positions in business, government and academia have long been reserved for insiders and their children, many young people knew that their career prospects depended as much on their willingness to flatter Berlusconi or his cronies as on their ability to get the job done.

Nevertheless, even on a republican conception of liberty, most Italians remained free during Berlusconi’s rule. The reason is not just that Berlusconi never chose to interfere with the lives of his adversaries by, say, throwing a member of the opposition in jail for a rude op-ed; it’s that Italians knew perfectly well that Berlusconi had no more power to do such a thing than does Barack Obama. The price that opponents of Berlusconi were afraid of paying was not, as Virolı thinks, that Berlusconi might decide to interfere in their lives in an arbitrary manner but rather that he would choose not to tempt them with favors. For all the signore’s power and influence, ordinary Italians hardly lived in fear of his wrath.

The weakness of Virolı’s central assumption, that only the language of liberty can adequately express the horrors of Berlusconi’s rule, may explain why his account of Berlusconiland is not fully persuasive. Other critics of Berlusconi have written damning accounts of his reign, but instead of going so far as to claim that Berlusconi made Italians unfree, they have demonstrated that his government violated the equal treatment of citizens before the law, neglected the government’s duties to further the economic interests of its citizens and condoned corruption (failings that liberals as well as republicans condemn). In *The Sack of Rome* (2006), for example, Alexander Stille explains that Berlusconi’s business empire was, from its first days, built on political favors and rent-seeking. A true modernization of Italy’s economy would have given his companies unwanted competition and deprived them of crucial state subsidies. Berlusconi chose instead to preserve arcane rules and bureaucratic roadblocks, or even to create new ones, to protect his business interests. He sacrificed the country’s economic well-being for his own.

Berlusconi’s influence on the judicial system was equally disastrous. Whereas in many countries the statute of limitations cannot expire after a defendant has been indicted, in Italy defendants go free if the highest court of appeals has not upheld their convictions within the allotted time. Knowing this, Berlusconi’s attorneys, whom, in a rare instance of efficiency, he made members of Parliament, shortened the statute of limitations for the most troublesome white-collar crimes and devised rules to strengthen legal tactics for delaying trials. This change had the desired effect of aiding Berlusconi’s defense in his trials for false accounting and embezzlement. It also had the unintended effect of making it more difficult to jail members of the Mafia.

Stille and others have described the disastrous economic and legal fallout of Berlusconi’s rule in much greater detail than Virolı. But Virolı, in his own way, paints an even more memorable portrait of Italy’s new ruling class. His description of Berlusconi as a signore is on the money. And while the servility of Berlusconi’s hangers-on may have been self-imposed, it still raises the central paradox of Berlusconiland. Absolute monarchs are able to cow their courtiers into submission by wielding the implicit threat of pain, imprisonment or execution. Berlusconi never had such tyrannical powers. Even so, his underlings acted as if they were mere courtiers—apparently, the hope of getting rich was quite enough to keep them in line. This makes the Italian case all the more relevant at a time when the super rich and their political enablers seek to wield ever more influence over democracies in a climate of austerity. It seems that to achieve their purposes, our would-be masters need not impede our rights or liberties: the promise of a farthing of their vast riches might be quite enough to turn many of us into docile servants.

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JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Change offensive position (11)
8 God’s period of mourning (5)
9 Writer of doggerel who samples “The Raven”? (9)
10 Hint at nut by sides of obscure river (10)
11 Flimsy article left unfinished (4)
12 Tell all about seat of primal drives and external facade (6)
13 Bean stuffed with last bit of capsicum (that is, pepper) (8)
16 Touched base with mixed-up teen, one who’s playing hooky (8)
18 Where a giraffe might be seen if a car broke down (6)
21 Small as a prong? (4)
22 Delaying tactic resulting from strain, assuming I clear the table (10)
24 Interpret my retro commercial presaging the end of the mass-produced (5-4)
25 In tic-tac-toe, X's are forbidden things (2-3)

26 Multiply what some Republicans might charge each other? (11)

DOWN
1 Made a joke, and supplied everything but the opening (7)
2 Mythical king is willing, with Minoan leader coming in soon… (9)
3 …to cool stovepipe (3,3)
4 Fancy speeches primarily rescued the man, like a life preserver (8)
5 A hydroelectric structure is urgent? (4)
6 Knowledge stifles desire where food is prepared (7)
7 Strangely, sonar rubs out long-dead beast (12)
8 Acceptable test exists on plant (12)
14 In New Zealand, a carrier for “pipe disease” (9)
15 With Garr or Hatcher around, I chatter and dish (8)
17 Deceitful spam involves a French source of light for tanning studio equipment (7)
19 The way we count on energy is extreme (7)
20 I live surrounded by liquor and steak (6)
23 Shifty politician concealing corruption, for example (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3227

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