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The Austerity Blackout

Imagine that the people of an American state, struggling after an overwhelming natural disaster and wrestling with a lingering debt crisis, were being forced by an unelected “control board” to live under a brutal austerity regime. Imagine that, rather than accept the cuts, thousands of workers and retirees took to the streets in defense of public education, public services, civil society, and their own economic survival. Imagine that security forces unleashed clouds of tear gas as they clashed with students demanding to preserve higher education in the face of devastating cuts.

That should make a hell of a story, right? Wrong—because it happened in Puerto Rico. When the US territory rose up on May 1 to protest an austerity regime conceived in Washington and imposed without the approval of the people’s elected representatives, the story received barely a mention in commercial media. Broadcast and cable news outlets that obsessively cover every detail of Donald Trump’s presidency can hardly be bothered with what’s happening in the rest of the country. The states get little attention, and territories like Puerto Rico are pretty much forgotten. This is disastrous for an island commonwealth where 3.3 million residents have no voting representation in Congress or the Electoral College. Puerto Ricans must rely on the media to remind the rest of the country that they are US citizens. (A 2017 Morning Consult poll found that 46 percent of Americans were unaware of this fact.) Yet analyses of media coverage of last fall’s hurricanes found that Puerto Rico’s suffering got far less attention than that of mainland states hit by storms.

The neglected story of how democracy is being sacrificed on the altar of austerity in communities that are poor, racially diverse, and far from the corridors of power certainly did not begin with Trump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. After Rick Snyder’s election as governor of Michigan in 2010, power certainly did not begin with T rump. 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The Persistence of Palestine

Survival and struggle, 70 years after the Nakba.

With the replacement of Palestine by Israel and the expulsion of most of its Arab population in 1948, it appeared that the Zionist dream had become a reality. A Jewish state had arisen, and there was no competing Palestinian state; ethnic cleansing had produced a massive demographic transformation, and the land of all those “absent” Arabs could be appropriated. The Zionists’ hope and expectation was that the refugees would simply disappear, and even the memory that this had been an Arab-majority country for more than a millennium could be effaced. As Golda Meir put it, “There were no such things as Palestinians…. They did not exist.” It seemed that the colonial-settler ideal had been realized: The natives were gone, there was plenty of space, their beautiful stone houses could be repurposed, and their “khnummus” could be rebranded and mispronounced.

Taking the long view, however, things look quite different. From this perspective, it is clear that for all the power of the Israeli military and its lethal security services, the vibrancy of the Israeli economy, and the aggressive potency of Israeli nationalism, this is in many ways a failed colonial-settler project. As the historian Patrick Wolfe has written, “Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies…. The colonizers come to stay: *invasion is a structure not an event*” (emphasis added). In Palestine, however, the native society has not been eliminated. Palestine is not “as Jewish as England is English,” as Chaim Weizmann once candidly expressed Zionist aims.

Instead, today, the population of the entire country from the river to the sea is at least half Palestinian, and that proportion is growing. The natives are still there, unified by decades of occupation and colonization since 1967, and they are restless. Those Palestinians who have managed to remain in historical Palestine—in spite of the ceaseless efforts to dispossess them—continue to resist erasure. Outside of Palestine, an equal number remain profoundly attached to their homeland and to the right of return. The Palestinians have not forgotten, they have not gone away, and the memory of Palestine and its dismemberment has not been effaced. Indeed, wider international audiences are increasingly aware of these realities.

Nevertheless, the situation in Palestine today seems gloomy. The Palestinian national movement is in an advanced state of dilapidation and without a strategy, and the Palestinian people are physically fragmented. The occupation and its evil stepchild, the never-halted colonization of Palestine, are proceeding apace. For decades now, the bulldozers have not stopped working for a moment. Unarmed Palestinians are gunned down with impunity, with thousands wounded and scores killed in Gaza just in recent weeks. Meanwhile, Israel’s vital connection with its longtime enablers in the American metropole is stronger than ever in the era of Trump and Bibi.

However, two new phenomena have ominous implications for the Zionist colonial-settler project and for the Greater Israel movement that dominates the country. The first has developed among Palestinians, who understand the futility of the approach of both wings of their national movement, located in Ramallah and in Gaza. Instead of futile diplomacy and pointless (and easily exploited) armed resistance, nonviolent grassroots movements are growing stronger. They range from the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement to the kind of marches we’ve seen for the past several weeks in Gaza. Despite what we’re told in the media, Palestinians have long employed nonviolent tactics in their quest for liberation. Like the ground-up, community-based, and mainly nonviolent resistance witnessed during the general strike of 1936 and the first intifada from 1987 until the early ‘90s, this involves a fertile and inventive range of efforts.

Such an approach terrifies the Israeli security establishment, which depends on demonizing any Palestinian resistance to absolute Israeli dominance as “terrorism” and then smashing it. As retired Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad said of Israel’s response to Palestinian nonviolence, “We don’t do Gandhi very well.”

The other new development is in the United States. The growing dissent from the consensus of idiocy on Palestine that grips most of the US political and media class is a remarkable phenomenon. This dissent encompasses universities and colleges, most recently Barnard, where a resolution supporting divestment from companies that benefit from the oppression of Palestinians passed overwhelmingly. It includes the Movement for Black Lives, whose platform embraces a clear rejection of Israeli apartheid practices and the overlapping tactics and ideologies of the Israeli and US police states. It also includes the Democratic Party, where the gap between the increasingly enlightened grass roots and a leadership still addled by Israel-advocacy Kool-Aid is growing apace. Most strikingly, however, it is profoundly affecting the American Jewish community, where there is growing revulsion at the increasingly intolerant, illiberal, fundamentalist, and racist cast of Israeli politics and society.

None of this means that we are on the brink of a just peace in Palestine that would enable two peoples to live as equals in the same land. Nevertheless, after seven decades of attempting to replace one people with another, Zionism faces the unsustainability of such a project in the 21st century. Edward Said wrote that, at the outset, Zionism “won the political battle for Palestine in the international world in which ideas, representation, rhetoric, and images were at issue.” It is losing that battle today, which is a cause for optimism for those who seek peace with justice for Palestinians and Israelis.
Howard Bryant has long been one of our most important commentators at the intersection of sports, history, and politics. He’s the author of eight books, including Juicing the Game: Drugs, Power, and the Fight for the Soul of Major League Baseball; a senior writer for ESPN; and the editor of The Best American Sports Writing 2017. His latest book is The Heritage: Black Athletes, a Divided America, and the Politics of Patriotism.

-Dave Zirin

DZ: What revived the Heritage?

HB: It’s the responsibility that the black athlete has accepted, or that has been placed on them, since World War II—the responsibility that these athletes feel to be the public and political faces of black America.

DZ: We’re seeing a rebirth of political athletes right now. During the previous era, when very few athletes spoke out against injustice, did you think that the Heritage had died?

HB: Absolutely. The backlash immediately following Tommie Smith and John Carlos [who raised their fists on the 1968 Olympic stand] and Curt Flood [who took Major League Baseball all the way to the Supreme Court to oppose rules preventing free agency] meant that, once you get to the early 1970s, it’s O.J. Simpson, then Michael Jordan, then Tiger Woods. It was a succession of athletes accepting the idea that everything is fine—that players were making more money than ever before, and that was enough.

DZ: What revived the Heritage?

HB: Trayvon Martin revived the Heritage. Tamir Rice revived the Heritage. Eric Garner revived the Heritage. If you were a black athlete, there was no way that you could deny what was taking place in the communities where you grew up. Think Carmelo Anthony with Freddie Gray [both from Baltimore], or even LeBron James with Tamir Rice, or Richard Sherman with what takes place in Los Angeles. There’s no way that you could look at your communities and say that everything is fine.

DZ: In your mind, are there standards for who gets to lay claim to the Heritage? Like the athlete who endorses a local candidate—is that the same as the athlete who takes part in a Black Lives Matter protest?

HB: I think you can lay claim to the Heritage even if you’re not in the streets. You can’t be in the streets and not be in the Legislature, but being in the Legislature doesn’t mean that the streets aren’t also important. This is no different than Jackie Robinson recognizing that his [more mainstream] activism must not be used to undermine Paul Robeson’s [more radical activism]. He learned it late, but he learned it: You have to have both. But if you’re one of those people who discounts the necessity of being in the streets, then you undermine the Heritage. There’s no substitute for being in the street. There’s no substitute for confrontation.

DZ: Talk about the collision between the Heritage and the post-9/11 era, in which we live in a state of permanent war and mandated patriotism at sporting events. What has that collision produced?

HB: There is no greater influence in American culture today than 9/11—9/11 is Pearl Harbor, 9/11 is Watergate. When you look at sports, the specter of 9/11 touches everything. It transformed sports from a place where being apolitical was part of the business model, to making politics part of the business model. And those politics are extremely powerful. They are militarized. They are racialized. They are internalized in terms of heroes and villains. It set up a confrontation, because you have this hero worship of police at a time when police brutality is an everyday occurrence. You’re asking African Americans to defy and to genuflect toward the very entities that have caused harm to the black community.

Now we have black players who have seen their own country turned against them by the White House and the people who own the teams. It’s deliberate, and it’s designed to demonize not only the black athlete but the black concern over police brutality—to turn fighting police brutality into being un-American. It has turned the American flag into a symbol of whiteness, and the players who are protesting police brutality into symbols of anti-Americanism, which could not be further from the truth.

You have this hero worship of police at a time when police brutality is an everyday occurrence.
The Court on Trump

Will the Supremes stand up to his excesses?

On April 25, the Supreme Court heard its final argument for the current term—fittingly, in Trump v. Hawaii, the challenge to President Trump’s so-called “Muslim ban.” That case will provide the first direct Supreme Court test of this administration’s excesses. But it is only one of the many blockbuster cases still to be decided this term—in nearly all of which the administration has urged the Court to adopt radical positions, overruling or disregarding precedent to further the White House’s political ends. By the end of June, when it recesses for the summer, we will have a much better sense of whether the newly reconstituted Roberts Court, joined by Neil Gorsuch last term, will prove a brake on the president, or an aider and abettor in his radical schemes. (Disclaimer: The ACLU, where I serve as national legal director, is counsel in several of the cases discussed here and has filed friend-of-the-court briefs in most of the others.)

In the Muslim-ban case, the administration argues that the Court should simply ignore abundant evidence that Trump intended to ban Muslims by using nations as proxies for religion. This argument breaks from precedent instructing that, in assessing whether the government has violated the establishment clause by favoring or disfavoring a particular religion, judges must review all “publicly available evidence” and cannot “turn a blind eye to the context in which [the] policy arose.” Solicitor General Noel Francisco sought to close his oral argument with a flourish by claiming that Trump had been “crystal-clear...that he had no intention of imposing the Muslim ban.” But the opposite is true, and the following week Trump insisted, yet again, that he would not apologize for the ban. To side with the president and uphold an unprecedented bar to entry for 150 million people, virtually all of them Muslim, would mark a radical and disturbing departure from the Court’s establishment-clause precedent.

In Carpenter v. United States, the Trump administration’s position would mark the end of privacy in the digital age. The specific dispute concerns whether the government needs a warrant to obtain records of the cell towers that an individual’s phone connected to over the course of several months. The data allows the government to construct a map of everywhere an individual traveled 24/7 as long as he or she was carrying the phone. The administration argues that because we “voluntarily” give this information to our cell-phone service providers when we use a phone, there is no Fourth Amendment protection for it. By that reasoning, all information shared digitally—including e-mails, Web searches, and the Internet sites one reads or views—would become an open book for the government. It would end privacy as we have known it for the past 200 years.

In Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission, the Trump administration yet again broke with precedent to further its political agenda. Never before in its history has the Justice Department supported a constitutional exemption from a nondiscrimination statute. One of the department’s principal responsibilities is to enforce civil-rights laws, and it has always opposed arguments that businesses have a constitutional right to discriminate. But not this time. The Trump administration filed a brief arguing that bakers should have a First Amendment right to refuse to make a cake for a same-sex wedding, even if they would make the same cake for an opposite-sex wedding.

The fate of public-sector unions is in the Court’s hands this term as well, and again the Trump administration has urged it to depart from precedent. The Court is considering a First Amendment challenge to a law common in many states that requires workers who are not members of a union to pay fees to cover the services that the union must provide by law to all employees, such as collective bargaining and the processing of grievances. More than 40 years ago, the Court upheld such fees as long as they were not used for political advocacy. The First Amendment, the Court reasoned, does not give non-members the right to impose the cost of services they receive on others. But Trump has asked the Court to overrule that precedent and deal what could be a fatal blow to public-sector unions.

In Lucia v. Securities and Exchange Commission, the Trump administration has even challenged the constitutionality of its own executive officials—because doing so furthers the right’s attack on the administrative state. Ever since the New Deal, the federal government has operated in large measure through administrative agencies, like the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency, that issue rules, punish violations, and often adjudicate cases. In order to assure independence, the administrative-law judges who preside over the individual cases for these agencies are often insulated, much like the civil service, from direct hiring and firing by the president or other political actors. But conservatives opposed to “big government” have urged that these individuals must be direct political appointees, a result that would raise serious fairness and integrity concerns. The Justice Department successfully defended the SEC’s independence from political interference in the lower courts, but switched sides before the
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DNA INFO

All in the Family

The arrest in April of a man suspected of being the Golden State Killer closed a case that has haunted Californians since the 1970s. More than 40 years after the first recorded attack, Joseph James DeAngelo—a former police officer—was charged with six counts of murder, though he’s believed to have committed at least 12 murders and 50 rapes.

Even so, the details of the breakthrough in the decades-long search have raised questions about consumer privacy. Investigators uploaded crime-scene DNA samples to GEDmatch, an open-source genealogy database where users can submit their own genetic data to find undiscovered relatives. By creating a fake profile, police were able to match DeAngelo’s genetic information with relatives who had uploaded to the site, and eventually traced the genetic material to DeAngelo himself.

Privacy experts worry about how much access law enforcement has to consumer genetic databases. They also point out that many users may not know that their DNA can be put to “non-genealogical uses.”

In a statement, GEDmatch co-founder Curtis Rogers warned that users should “understand the possible uses of their DNA, including identification of relatives that have committed crimes or were victims of crimes.” In short, according to New York University law professor Erin Murphy, “if your sibling or parent or child engaged in this activity online, they are compromising your family for generations.”

—Andrew Tan-Delli Cicchi

Period Pains

Shame and silence around menstruation have enabled outright cruelty.

When is a necessity not a necessity? When it’s a product used by half the population every month for 35 to 40 years, but never even once by the other half. In case you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m talking about menstrual supplies. Pads and tampons cost women up to $120 a year—and that’s not counting pain relievers like Midol or Advil. Over a lifetime, it can add up to as much as $4,500.

Menstrual supplies have been in the news thanks to attempts by activists in several states to repeal the so-called tampon tax—the sales tax levied on menstrual supplies in 36 states. The rationale for applying sales tax to menstrual products is that they are luxuries, not necessities, which any woman can tell you is ridiculous. These are not products women can simply choose not to use, like perfume or cosmetics. It is indeed insulting that women, who already earn less than men, are taxed for an essential product that only women use—a tax, let us not forget, originally levied by male lawmakers, and sometimes preserved by them, too. Four states have dropped the tax in recent years, but when California legislators voted to do the same, Governor Jerry Brown vetoed it: The state, with its proposed $190 billion budget, just couldn’t do without the $20 million women paid in each year. (He vetoed getting rid of the tax on diapers, too.)

Dropping the tax would be a fine symbolic gesture, but a more immediate problem is that menstrual products aren’t covered by food stamps or WIC coupons (neither are soap, toilet paper, or the other basics of modern hygiene—as if people down on their luck don’t deserve to be clean). Imagine the stress this induces in poor women: Will I have enough to get through those days? What if I cut back on changing my pad and bleed through? Every year in the United States, one out of four women struggles to come up with the money to pay for menstrual products, and one in five low-income women misses school, work, or some other commitment because she didn’t have adequate supplies. You don’t hear much about it because eww, periods. It’s a lot like the stress of paying for diapers (also not covered by food stamps), which a Yale study showed was connected to depression in low-income mothers and grandmothers.

The National Diaper Bank Network, which provides millions of diapers to poor parents and grandparents and has done so much to make diaper need a political issue, wants to do the same for menstrual supplies. On May 1, the network launched the Alliance for Period Supplies, with about 50 allied programs across the country. The program’s goal is simple: to make menstrual supplies free or affordable to all. “Talking about diapers in relation to poverty is not easy,” Joanne Samuel Goldblum, executive director of the Diaper Bank and founder of the alliance, told me when we spoke by phone, “but once you start the conversation, people get it. Periods are the next step.”

If so, that will mark a welcome and long-overdue cultural shift. Diapers, after all, are about babies—sweet, lovable, helpless babies. Menstruation is about females—their rebellious bodies, their dangerous sexuality and fertility. Periods have always been a source of shame and humiliation for women; not for nothing is menstruation called “the curse,” or that ads for menstrual supplies typically show beautiful women in long white dresses idling in fields of flowers. This shame, and the silence around it, has allowed for garden-variety unfairness—as Nancy Kramer of the campaign Free the Tampons has pointed out, public and school restrooms provide free toilet paper and soap, so why not free menstrual products? Shame and silence have also enabled outright cruelty. As NPR Illinois has reported, Chicago’s Noble Network of Charter Schools has such strict policies about bathroom use that girls are bleeding through their clothes while waiting for escorts to take them to the restroom. In response, administrators on some campuses changed the dress code so that girls could tie sweaters around their waists to hide the bloodstains. (The Noble Network denies that there’s a problem.) I’m quite sure the people who instituted this policy can use the ladies’ room whenever they need to, and

We’re finally catching on: Periods aren’t embarrassing, and menstrual supplies are essential.
do not require themselves to go around in bloodstained clothes covered by a telltale sweater for boys to mock. Haven’t they ever been teenagers?

There are signs that a cultural shift is happening. The Noble Network story got a lot of attention. The issue of providing sufficient supplies to women in prison has got a lot of attention, too—and it’s about time, considering that a box of 16 pads can cost a woman prisoner 21 hours’ pay. As of August 2017, federal prisons provide an unlimited supply of pads and tampons, as do the prison systems in New York City, Colorado, Virginia, Maryland, Nebraska, and Arizona, with Connecticut on the way. In the House of Representatives, the Menstrual Equity for All Act would let women use flexible-spending accounts to pay for menstrual products. (Only Democrats are co-sponsoring the bill, which is probably why GovTrack reports its chance of passage at 1 percent.) In the Senate, the Dignity Act would codify prisoners’ access to pads, tampons, and non-prescription painkillers (chance of passage: 10 percent).

The Alliance for Period Supplies is pushing legislative efforts to increase access while also organizing grassroots drives to collect supplies for poor and homeless women. You can get involved, too. Ask your church, synagogue, community group, or school to collect supplies. Educate yourself, your community, and your legislators about period poverty. If you’d like to know more, pick up a copy of Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity by Jennifer Weiss-Wolf. Too busy? Donate. Strapped for cash? Buy U by Kotex products at CVS until June 2 to support a donation of up to 1 million pads and tampons. And because no cause these days is complete without a hashtag, raise awareness on social media with #addpads and #endperiodpoverty. For more information, visit allianceforperiodsupplies.org.

Supreme Court when Trump took office. A broad ruling could call into question the legality of administrative-law judge appointments in many other federal agencies.

In Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute, the Justice Department also switched sides after Trump came to power, but in doing so also reversed more than 20 years of department precedent. In the lower courts, the department had sided with challengers to Ohio’s practice of removing voters from the rolls if they fail to vote and fail to respond to a single mailed notice, even where there’s no basis to believe that the individual has become ineligible to vote. Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, the Justice Department had maintained that such practices violate the federal “motor voter” law. But the Trump administration, in keeping with the Republican Party’s tactic of suppressing voter turnout where high turnout favors Democrats, has urged the Court to stand with voter suppression. And in another voting case to be decided this term, Abbott v. Perez, the Justice Department, which originally sued Texas for racially discriminatory voting maps, has yet again switched sides, and now defends the very state it sued.

The pattern that emerges reflects an administration that cares little for precedent, and that will switch sides in a case at the drop of a hat if it serves the agenda of its radical base. Politics at the Justice Department is not exactly new, but the brazenness of this administration’s positions is unprecedented. The solicitor general is sometimes referred to as the “tenth justice,” because he or she is supposed to be more loyal to the law than to politics. That tradition, like so many others, has been abandoned by this administration and this solicitor general. The question now is whether the Supreme Court will go along for the ride, or stand up for the rule of law when the executive branch has so radically thrown it overboard.

David Cole, The Nation’s legal affairs correspondent, is the national legal director of the ACLU.
**CHINA**

**Airing of Grievances**

The latest squabble between Washington and Beijing has officially taken flight. In a series of recent letters, China's Civil Aviation Administration demanded that more than 30 international air carriers, including United and American Airlines, change any language or website architecture suggesting that Taiwan, Macau, or Hong Kong are not part of China. The White House, in response, has denounced the edict as “Orwellian nonsense.”

The wording of an airline’s drop-down menus may seem a trivial affair, but the demand is indicative of a larger pattern: While the Chinese government has routinely imposed restrictions on foreign companies operating within the country’s mainland borders, it is increasingly attempting to export its censorship abroad.

Beijing exercises an uncompromising “One China” policy. Hong Kong and Macau are both special administrative regions of China with greater (albeit shrinking) autonomy than the rest of the country, while Taiwan is a self-governing democracy that Beijing considers a breakaway province.

Although Beijing hasn’t yet penalized any of the offending airlines, the Marriott hotel chain found its website and apps blacked out in China for a week in January after listing Tibet, Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as individual countries.

Afterward, Marriott said on a Chinese social-media platform that it “will absolutely not support any separatist organization that will undermine China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

—Safiya Charles

**Stacey Abrams’s Lesson**

*She has something to teach progressives about the future of politics.*

The governor’s race in Georgia is already one of the most closely watched in the nation, as a potential harbinger of the expected “blue wave” in 2018. Democrats haven’t held the office since Roy Barnes lost it in 2002, and winning it back is still a long shot. But the race remains notable for a couple of reasons.

The first is history. Over the course of the state’s 242 years since the Declaration of Independence, all 81 of its governors have been white men. This year, the Republican candidate for the open seat will be yet another white man, almost surely Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle. Nothing about this monopoly by race and gender is unique, certainly not in the South. What’s special in Georgia is that both Democrats vying to challenge this year’s white man are women: Stacey Abrams and Stacey Evans. In fact, it may turn out that 2018 is only tangentially a year of Democrats rising, and primarily a year of women persisting.

In any case, Georgia’s Democrats vote on May 22, and both the polls and the early-voting pattern suggest Abrams will win. That shouldn’t be surprising: She was the minority leader in the State House of Representatives for the better part of a decade, has an impressive history working for voter registration, and has proved to be a strong fundraiser. Indeed, Abrams is the far better candidate by every fundamental measure save one: She’s not white. Abrams would be the first black woman to serve as a state governor in US history, and that fact means she had to challenge the party’s conventional wisdom on Southern politics.

From the start, Abrams was dogged by the insinuation that she can’t win in the general election. Even if this is true, it’s a silly point, given that no Democrat stands a terribly good chance at winning statewide in Georgia at the moment. Which actually points to the second notable thing about the race: Abrams is trying to rewrite the rules of Southern—or at least Georgian—politics, by making the electorate more closely reflect society at large. If she succeeds, she’ll teach progressives much about the future of American politics.

Political operatives like to talk math, and rightly so: Democracy boils down to a tally. My Nation colleague Joan Walsh has done some of the math already with her profile of Abrams in June 2017, but it bears repeating. As Abrams tells it, there are two schools of thought on Georgia for Democrats. The first, the old school, centers white power and is definitionally conservative, in that it holds tight to an outdated idea. Its heyday was arguably Bill Clinton’s Blue Dog reign, during which Democrats still took up to 40 percent of the white vote, at a time when white voters were more than 70 percent of the electorate. Combined with a strong share of black voters—who were about a quarter of the electorate, and were left to choose between a conservative Democrat and an openly racist Republican—this was enough for the Democrats to win consistently statewide.

This, essentially, is Evans’s campaign. It was Jon Ossoff’s as well, and Michelle Nunn’s and Jason Carter’s before them. Note the trend here: Every one of these candidates lost, despite all the hoopla about their potential to bring whites back to the Democratic fold in the South. As one operative put it, there’s something about the definition of insanity in this pattern.

The old-school math no longer adds up because Southern white people have grown steadily more uncomfortable with a pluralistic society. Republican demagogues have channeled that discomfort into racist populism—anti-immigrant, pro-greed, and resentful of the social safety net, all of which are proxy wars in the fight over a more diverse slicing of the American pie of opportunity. A sectional party not far off from the Confederacy has emerged on the right.

Abrams is trying to rewrite the rules of Southern politics by making the electorate more closely reflect society at large. Meanwhile, white voters have also become less pivotal. And that’s the new-school math.

Barack Obama changed things. His 2008 run drove black Georgians up to 30 percent of the electorate, a huge shift that has been lasting, even in the midterms. Meanwhile, the number of Latinos, Asian Americans, and others who don’t identify as...
white has skyrocketed, from just over 3 percent of voters in 2004 to 11.5 percent in 2016. All of this adds up to a rapid decline in white voting power at the Georgia ballot box. By 2016, white voters were down to 60 percent of the electorate, matching their share of the population.

The trend lines will continue in these directions, because Obama wasn’t the only force for change. Black Americans, Latinos, and young whites have been pouring into the state, fueling Georgia’s population rise and its economic growth. So Abrams’s argument is basically this: Run more candidates like Obama and you’ll reach more new voters. Nor is this an argument for purely representational politics. Rather, it’s to say that a progressive political future in the South depends on turning out huge numbers of voters of color who already want to see that future, not chasing white voters who fear it.

Actually achieving the turnout needed to win is an expensive proposition—more like the money the Democrats spend in Virginia than what they’ve shelled out in the Deep South. It’ll demand more than mailers and TV ads; in Georgia, as in many other Southern states, you have to knock on doors and talk to people, which means traversing the spread-out rural areas beyond Atlanta. It will take a real investment—and “investment” is the right word for it. Abrams may not win in November; any Democrat will need an unprecedented turnout. But if you want a progressive majority in Georgia, or in any other so-called red state, you’ve got to do the work of building one.

A progressive political future depends on turning out huge numbers of voters of color.

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**It’s a Witch Hunt!**

Or

Some witchlike people have disguises that
May cover up a black and pointy hat.

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Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

The one nabbed first of all, to Trump’s chagrin, Was “Lock Her Up” adviser Michael Flynn. Then Manafort and Gates, Paul’s former pal, Were eased into the Mueller team’s corral. And then—surprise!—indictments were announced Of Russian guys whose names can’t be pronounced. And Papadopoulos then upped the score. It’s now a coven and a half or more. Who circles there, despite the curling smoke, Around a cauldron full of Diet Coke? Who waves his broomstick with a practiced ease To conjure up a hamburger with cheese? Who gives a guiding light to Robert Mueller By being, for the most, bright orange in color? His curses, maybe dozens at a clip, May do no good if other witches flip. Complaints about a witch hunt are for naught If now and then some witches do get caught.

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**SNAPSHOT**

ADREES LATIF

**A Hello to Arms**

Christian Kaufman, 9, walks with a holstered airsoft gun past an American flag during an open-carry rally on the sidelines of the National Rifle Association’s meeting in Dallas on May 5. A recent study shows that 10 years after a state passes a right-to-carry law, violent crime will be 13 to 15 percent higher than if the state had done nothing.
Rick Treviño is on a mission. We’re in the middle of Fiesta, the city’s annual commemoration of the battles of the Alamo (won by the Mexican Army) and San Jacinto (won by the Texas settlers). It’s a 10-day-long street party with music, parades, and its own rituals, one of which is the accumulation and display of Fiesta medals. These brightly colored enamel pins, often suspended from a piece of ribbon, range from advertisements to calaveras (sugar skulls) to cartoon characters.

Treviño, a Democratic candidate in Texas’s 23rd Congressional District, came here to meet voters and sell some medals he’d made himself to raise money for his campaign. Based on the Lotería (a kind of Mexican bingo using cards with images instead of just numbers and letters), Treviño’s medals depict him standing in front of a chalkboard over the caption El Maestro (“The Teacher”).

The problem is that Treviño, who only quit his job as a high-school teacher in August, keeps running into former students. “My school, San Houston High School, was about 50/50 black and Hispanic,” he says. “The common denominator was poverty.” So after asking about their parents and congratulating those who have found jobs or are still in school (and commiserating with those who haven’t yet been able to find work), Treviño ends up giving away almost as many medals as he sells. For most candidates, this would still be a sensible goodwill gesture, but Treviño actually needs the money.

“Talk about a grassroots guy campaigning on a shoestring? He’s it!” says Chris Kutalik, coordinator for Our Revolution Texas, which endorsed Treviño in December, when almost no one else took his candidacy seriously. Back then, Treviño stood out from the Democratic field for his youth (he’s 33) and his Chapo Trap House rhetoric, describing Goldman Sachs as “evil,” ridiculing corporate Democrats, and tweeting “Neoliberalism fucking sucks.”

“I’m not a liberal—I’m a lefty,” Treviño says when we first meet at Jim’s, a burger-and-breakfast joint. Phone calls or texts to his campaign get answered by the candidate himself. And while he has a campaign treasurer—Joleen Garcia, a local activist who frowns every time the candidate gives away another medal—Treviño for Congress runs out of the back of his car. “My headquarters is in the cloud,” he says. “Or whatever restaurant has good Wi-Fi.”

Streching west from San Antonio to the outskirts of El Paso and running south along the Mexican border, the 23rd Congressional District covers 58,000 square miles, making it bigger than the entire state of New York. It’s also one of the most flippable districts in the country, swinging from Republican to Democrat and back repeatedly over the last 12 years. The current incumbent, Will Hurd, a former CIA officer and one of three black Republicans in Congress, was reelected in 2016 by just 3,000 votes.
“I took out all my savings and cashed in my retirement.”

— Rick Treviño, Democratic candidate for Congress
Most reporting on the March 6 primary tended to depict it as a two-person race between Gina Ortiz Jones, who served in Air Force Intelligence during the Iraq War and would be the first openly LGBTQ representative from Texas, and Jay Hulings, a former federal prosecutor who was in the same Harvard Law School class as Julián and Joaquin Castro, the twin brothers who dominate local politics. Hulings, who was endorsed by House minority whip Steny Hoyer, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Blue Dog Democrats, and End Citizens United, raised and spent over $600,000. Jones, backed by Emily’s List as well as LGBTQ and veterans’ groups, raised more than $1 million, three-quarters of which came from PACs and wealthy donors, and spent about $700,000.

As for Treviño, he raised a little more than $40,000, including about $3,200 from himself. “I took out all my savings and cashed in my retirement. I took the 20 percent hit,” he says. “Hopefully I don’t twist my ankle or get sick, because right now I don’t have health care.”

Instead of the consultant-crafted mailings and TV ads deployed by his opponents, Treviño relied on shoe leather and gasoline, seeking out voters in places like the unincorporated colonias along the border, where some of the poorest people in North America live without basic services. “They’d tell me, ‘I vote every year, but nothing’s changed. We still don’t have paved roads.’ Most of them had never seen a candidate before. And none of them thought Medicare for All or the right to a living wage was a crazy idea.”

When the ballots were counted, Hulings’s $92-a-vote campaign bought him a fourth-place finish with 6,600 votes. Jones led the field with 18,000, at a cost of about $39 per vote. And Treviño, who spent just $29,000, came in seventh with just 7,600, at a cost of just $3.80 per vote. “There are no incorporated colonias along the border, where some of the poorest people in North America live without basic services. “They’d tell me, ‘I vote every year, but nothing’s changed. We still don’t have paved roads.’ Most of them had never seen a candidate before. And none of them thought Medicare for All or the right to a living wage was a crazy idea.”

When the ballots were counted, Hulings’s $92-a-vote campaign bought him a fourth-place finish with 6,600 votes. Jones led the field with 18,000, at a cost of about $39 per vote. And Treviño, who spent just $29,000, came in second, making it into the May 22 runoff with a little over 7,600, at a cost of just $3.80 per vote. “There are no established laws of political science by which this should have been possible,” noted a San Antonio Express News columnist.

B

ig wave coming—get off the beach,” said seven-term congressman Charlie Dent (R-PA), explaining his decision not to seek reelection this year. If Dent is right, then anybody on a board has a chance of catching a wild ride—perhaps explaining why some Democrats are putting so much time and effort into pushing other Democrats off the ballot. Maybe the real fear isn’t that voters in Texas and other supposedly red states aren’t ready for Medicare for All or a $15-an-hour minimum wage or tuition-free education at public universities—but that they are.

The same poll that put Democratic Congressman Beto O’Rourke in a dead heat in his bid to unseat Senator Ted Cruz also showed that Texans are a lot less conservative than the stereotype, favoring tougher gun laws, a process for DACA Dreamers to stay and apply for citizenship, and the legalization of marijuana possession—all by considerable margins. Yet somehow, you never hear corporate Democrats being told, “Kid, this ain’t your night” so that a more progressive candidate can avoid an expensive primary fight over “minor policy differences.” Pragmatism “is a moral imperative,” preaches Jonathan Alter in The Daily Beast—as if ignoring the urgent needs of the rural poor, or the criminalization of African-American men, or the terrible damage to our environment were some kind of higher wisdom.

Alter’s not alone. Lately, the airwaves and pixels have been full of centrist Democrats warning the rest of us to quit griping about health care or Wall Street corruption and take one for the team. That list includes the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), which, having decided that it can do a better job of picking “winners” than the party’s own electorate, keeps putting its thumb on the scales in contested primaries across the country. And Hoyer, who was recently caught on tape pushing a progressive challenger in a Colorado congressional race to drop out. And Emily’s List, which picked sides in a race between two equally pro-choice women here in Texas—while refusing to back another who was the only woman on the ballot in her district, and is now in a runoff against a former Republican. All this so-called pragmatism comes from the assumption that the parameters of practical politics are already fixed—and as narrow as the space separating Andrew Cuomo from Chuck Schumer.

But what if that’s just plain wrong? For example, Alter’s claim that only candidates whose policies are acceptable to big donors can raise enough money to compete against the “mountains of cash” coming from Republican billionaires isn’t actually true. Ever since Howard Dean out-fund-raised all his competitors—and all of his predecessors—Democrats have known they don’t need to rely on corporate money to win. As pollster Stan Greenberg recently warned the party, if Democrats just keep talking about Trump or Russia, let the Republicans get away with tax cuts for the rich, and ignore the fact that for most people, wages still haven’t caught up with the cost of living, that big blue wave might not happen at all. “Momentum has stalled,” Greenberg warned, encouraging the party to refocus on health care and the economy because “Democratic voters are genuinely struggling...They remain in pain.”

What if the election of Donald Trump represents not merely a rightward swing of the pendulum, requiring Democrats to do little more than wait for the inevitable counterstroke, but a wrecking ball to politics-as-usual? What if the shape of the electorate is changing, making the kind of left-populist coalition the Bernie Sanders cam-
Defying the odds: Running a shoestring campaign, Rick Treviño placed second in the primary.

“We have tried over and over in Texas politics to run to the middle and to the right—and it’s not working.”

—Laura Moser, Democratic candidate for Congress

J ust ask Laura Moser. A fifth-generation Texan, Moser is part of the surge of women who reacted to Trump’s election by deciding to run for office themselves. A longtime journalist and the founder of Daily Action, a text-messaging service that sends its 300,000 subscribers one concrete call to action every day, Moser had a national profile—and Washington connections from her husband Arun Chaudhary’s years as official videographer in the Obama White House. Although Chaudhary’s consulting firm, Revolution Messaging, had done some work for Sanders in the 2016 primary, Moser herself had rung “hundreds of doorbells for Hillary” in Houston during the fall. She even cited Clinton as her inspiration for powering through a cold on the campaign trail in Texas’s Seventh Congressional District.

Then, just over a week before the March primary, the DCCC dumped a dossier of opposition research onto its website, attacking Moser as unelectable in a move that appeared designed to bolster one of her opponents, Lizzie Pannill Fletcher. As The Intercept’s Ryan Grim reported, Fletcher was backed by Houston megadonor Sherry Merfish, a longtime Emily’s List supporter who’d also bundled more than $250,000 for Clinton. Though both candidates are vociferously pro-choice—Moser’s parents were active in Planned Parenthood, and her mother Jane organized the clinic defense during the 1992 Republican convention that Fletcher features in her own campaign literature—Emily’s List came in hard on Fletcher’s behalf. Despite the attacks, Moser made it through to the May 22 runoff.

I caught up with both candidates at a meet-and-greet for the local Muslim community at Tarboosh, a Mediterranean restaurant north of Katy, the West Houston suburb named for the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) railroad that runs through it. Fletcher, a lawyer, was poised and businesslike in her presentation. Moser seemed a little more tentative. But her account—to a roomful of immigrants—of her grandfather’s flight from Nazi Germany was more tentative. But her account—to a roomful of immigrants—of her grandfather’s flight from Nazi Germany six weeks before Kristallnacht touched a nerve.

Knocking on doors in the neighborhood later that afternoon, Moser tells me about her grandparents. Frank Moser, who fled Berlin, was a lawyer. Her paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Lurie, served as the first female president of the Houston Jewish Community Center “during World War II, when the men were away.” Her own mother ran a children’s bookstore and taught speech at Houston Community College.

Moser can remember attending then-Texas Governor Ann Richards’s inaugural as an eighth grader and stuffing envelopes for Planned Parenthood. “I always canvassed. I love canvassing,” she says, despite the day’s wilting heat and the fact that, especially in Latino neighborhoods, “people don’t answer the door now” due to fear. During Hurricane Harvey, Moser organized a drive to get food and clothing to the unincorporated parts of Harris County. She credits her activism not to her political childhood, but to her experience as a freelance writer. “That teaches you that you have to turn it in. You have to pitch it. You have to show up.”

Though Moser enjoyed her time in DC—a photo of her 2-year-old daughter prostrate on the carpet during a White House seder went viral—she always intended to come home to Houston. “Washington is a really insular place, disconnected from people’s lives,” Moser says. “The DCCC attacks demonstrate that: ‘We disagree with you. Or we don’t think you’ll win. Therefore we’re going to destroy your character and life.’ It’s why I’m committed to living here. Also, my mom went to the grocery store for me yesterday.”

Ironically, getting monstered by the DCCC precipitated a spike in Moser’s fund-raising; the week after, she raised more than $86,000. Besides falsely implying that she’d put her husband on the campaign payroll, the DCCC dug up a snarky Washingtonian piece in which Moser had written that she’d rather have her “teeth pulled out without anesthesia” than live in rural Paris, Texas. The DCCC press release left that last part out, making it sound like Moser was dismissing her entire home state. The oppo researchers had even tracked down some insensitive comments she’d made as a 22-year-old freelancer after attending a gospel service in London. So Moser’s endorsement by the group Houston Black American Democrats in late April meant a lot to her.

The DCCC “tried to paint her as some kind of racist [and] totally misrepresented who she is as a person,” says Ginny Stogner McDavid, president of the Harris County AFL-CIO, which opposes Fletcher, citing her firm’s work on an $8 million lawsuit against the Justice for
Janitors campaign. “Lawyers are the new Pinkertons,” McDavid continues. “Half a century ago, corporations hired Pinkerton operatives to break strikes. Now they just use lawyers—Pinkertons with cuff links.”

Having Emily’s List against Moser hurt her, too. Not just because she’s a feminist who describes her support for Medicare for All as “a feminist issue,” but because the group’s imprimatur matters here. Norri Leder, a former Texas chapter leader of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, told me, “The Emily’s List endorsement made me sit up and take notice. I don’t think they would endorse someone unless they thought she could win.” Incensed by Republican incumbent John Culberson’s vote to repeal the Obama administration’s rule preventing people with severe mental illnesses from buying guns, she’s volunteering for Fletcher.

In a district that Clinton carried in 2016, it’s hardly surprising that the Democratic primary would be competitive. But the nastiness of the race signals more than personal rivalry, though that may also be a factor. When I ask Fletcher if it’s true that her father and Moser’s were once law partners, she says they were, adding: “Laura was a couple of years behind me in high school. When I was features editor of The Review, the school paper, I assigned Laura some stories.” (Wes Anderson fans will recognize their alma mater, St. John’s, as the setting for Rushmore.)

Both candidates are formidable women with extensive connections to Houston’s Democratic establishment. Fletcher’s campaign manager, Erin Mineberg, is the daughter of David Mineberg, former chair of the Harris County Democratic Party. Both are endorsed by Moms Demand Action and by CWA Local 6222. Moser is also endorsed by National Nurses United, the Harris County AFL-CIO, the Seafarers, the Teamsters, and the United Food and Commercial Workers union. Either would be an enormous improvement over Culberson, a Tea Party drone with a A-plus rating from the NRA who co-sponsored a “birther” bill in 2009 and opposes abortion, marriage equality, and the “liberal obsession with climate change.” Yet the turnout in the Republican primary, where Culberson faced token opposition, was 5,000 votes higher than in the seven-person Democratic slugfest.

One response to that cautionary note is that, to flip this district, Democrats need to give Republicans—people who voted for Greg Abbott for governor—somebody they don’t feel uncomfortable voting for. In other words, a re-run of the Jon Ossoff campaign in Georgia, with no need to change the “Panera Bread strategy” of ignoring economic inequality and the party’s own dependence on corporate donors. “Democrats are winning Harris County,” Fletcher told me. “We don’t need a new approach.”

Moser disagrees. “We have tried something over and over in Texas politics which is to run to the middle and to the right, and it’s not working,” she told the Houston Chronicle. “So why not stand firm for the values that we care and immigration reform—that sets her apart. Fletcher’s running a campaign; Moser is building a movement.

“We started with 1,300 volunteers and created a grassroots structure around that,” says Josh Levin, the campaign’s field director. Relying on volunteers to “grow their own” teams for phone-banking and block-walking means that, win or lose, Moser is expanding the progressive base of the party. “We are planning to flip this district whether or not we make it through the runoff,” says campaign manager Linh Nguyen. “We regularly meet with the Democratic precinct chairs, helping them with digital organizing and advising on when to start GOTV [get out the vote] efforts.” It’s an approach that has already convinced one prominent Ossoff supporter, actor/activist Alyssa Milano. She’s backing Moser this time.

Hanks to years of gop gerrymandering, any Democrat now faces an uphill fight in Texas. (Last December, the New York Review of Books blog ran one of the best analyses I’ve seen of the classic racist techniques of “packing and cracking” voting blocs. The writer? Laura Moser.) But that fact, and the results of this year’s elections, shouldn’t obscure what’s at stake—in Texas and across the country. Despite what you may have read, this isn’t a fight “for the soul of the Democratic Party”—an entity whose very existence, like other supernatural phenomena, is a matter of faith, not evidence.

What’s at stake here is power: Who has it, who gets it, and how they use it. Those who believe that “America is already great”—perhaps because they themselves have done so well—will never deliver more than gradual change. But as Jim Hightower, the veteran Texas populist, put it to me when I stopped by to see him in Austin: “People aren’t interested in incremental change. People are being fucked.”

Travelling the state in his role as a board member of Our Revolution, Hightower got a close look at what he calls “the culmination of a two-party duopoly doing nothing for regular people.” Reminding me that the 19th-century Populist revolt first caught fire just a few hours north, in Cleburne, Hightower says his group has endorsed 29 candidates in Texas—of whom “17 won or made the runoffs.” Yet he worries that some of the current crop “are running for the wrong races. Running too high on the ballot.” After half a century in the fight,

ERIC CHAVARRIA
Hightower knows that our side needs some wins.

One of the most improbable could be gathering force just on the other side of town. When Mary Wilson first entered the campaign to unseat Lamar Smith, the climate-change denier who represents the 21st Congressional District, nobody paid her much attention. Though Smith, with ample backing from ExxonMobil and the Koch brothers, had done enormous damage as chair of the House Science Committee, he had also been repeatedly reelected by 20-point margins since first winning the seat in 1986. (Smith’s 2006 Democratic challenger, John Courage, was backed by Our Revolution in his successful race last year for a seat on the San Antonio City Council.)

Yet when Smith announced last November that he wouldn’t be running for reelection, the open seat drew a crowded field, including Derrick Crowe, an environmental activist and former Nancy Pelosi staffer backed by Our Revolution and (Nation) writer and environmentalist Bill McKibben. Already in the race was Joseph Kopser, a former Republican and West Point graduate backed (surprise!) by Steny Hoyer and other “national Democrats.” The DCCC promptly added the seat to its target list.

Here again, the primary coverage focused on Kopser and Crowe. Wilson, when she was mentioned at all, was described merely as the “fourth Austin Democrat in the race” or, more expansively, a “gay math teacher turned pastor.” (Although it’s been largely ignored, Texas has also seen a lavender wave this year, with more than 50 openly LGBTQ candidates running for office statewide.) Kopser, who spent over $800,000 in the primary, came in second with 14,787 votes, beaten by Wilson, who spent less than $50,000 for 15,736 votes—or about $3 each compared to Kopser’s $54.

“How many people do we have in the House who’ve lived paycheck to paycheck? Or who have listened, as I have, to a 69-year-old woman say, ‘I got sick, lost my job, and now they’re going to evict me.’ If he wins the primary, there are progressives that will stay home.”

Wilson credits her victory partly to her message and partly to “being the only woman in the race in the Year of the Woman…. I can bring together the entire party, from Our Revolution to Hillary voters. The women who dominate the crossover vote will look at me and see the mom and grandma, and see someone who does the same things they do.” Although a spokesperson from Emily’s List told The Nation that “we hope to see Mary Wilson in the general election,” the group has yet to endorse her in the runoff against Kopser.

W atching rick treviño work the line at the Community Day barbecue at Chinati, the modern-art museum in Marfa founded by artist Donald Judd, I keep remembering something that Hightower said: In rural Texas, “it’s not enough to be for the farmer. You’ve gotta be against these bastards who are trying to run over the farmer!” Some of the latter are here, including a woman who tells Treviño she doesn’t think she should have to pay for other people’s health care. He thanks her anyway and then goes over to chat with the security guards and catering workers.

On the 400-mile drive here, I learned a lot about what Treviño is against: the bigotry that greeted his mother when she emigrated from Mexico. The insurance and
pharmaceutical companies that profit off of his sister’s fibromyalgia. The assumption that his students’ lives are worth less because they are poor. And the Big Ag companies who treat the farmers in his district like peons.

Both his parents became nurses, and Treviño describes his childhood in Laredo as idyllic. “We were back and forth across the border all the time—in Nuevo Laredo, beers were $1 apiece.” The family home in San Antonio is comfortable, on a well-maintained suburban street. Treviño, who says he’s “always had access to passing-for-white privilege,” started a farmers’ market with his students as a school project. He was propelled into politics only after two of his kids were killed. “Kiana James—she was a cool kid.” He fights off a tear. “And Tru Sincere Trusty. It made me angry. I knew I could do more.

“It ended up precinct chair, then secretary of the Bexar County Democratic Party.” Treviño has always been a voracious reader—on the drive, he talked about Mark Twain, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, the famous 1971 debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, and Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton. One day in 2013, Treviño happened across a video of Bernie Sanders railing against “chained CPI”—the Obama administration’s move to change the way that Social Security benefits are calculated. It’s a wonky topic, but as I was learning, inside Treviño’s football-player chest beats the heart of a wonk.

“It gives the administration plausible deniability, but it’s still a cut,” he explains. “The government gives you less money in the future.” After that, he adds, “I never looked at the Democratic Party the same way. I felt hoodwinked. For me, being a Democrat was part of my identity.” Treviño remains a Democrat: “It’s the only game in town.” But he organized almost all of Bexar County’s precinct chairs against the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In 2016, he was a Sanders delegate in Philadelphia. The next year, he ran for San Antonio City Council—missing the runoff by 28 votes.

It’s that margin that keeps him going now—that and the sense that being the only Latino running in a district that’s 70 percent Hispanic may go some way to counter his lack of funding. Like Mary Wilson and Laura Moser, Treviño is confident of his chances in November. First, though, he has to make it through the runoff.

If he does, he’ll face Will Hurd, who won the GOP primary by 60 points, his profile buffed by a Texas-to-DC road trip last March with Congressman Beto O’Rourke. Two weeks after their #CongressionalCannonballRun blew up Twitter, O’Rourke declared his candidacy for the Senate.

Despite my best efforts, I never came within 200 miles of O’Rourke during my Texas journey. But when I spoke with him by phone, I could see what the campaign worker in Houston who described him to me as “progressive lite” was getting at. (He meant it as a compliment.)

“The response everywhere is encouraging,” O’Rourke said, describing the crowd in McKinney, “a very, very red area. People are very excited. It transcends party lines and other divisions.” So far, so bland. But then he said: “People want to save the country. I think everyone gets that this is on the line. Everything that you care about could be decided this year.

“I was just in Tulia, Texas, in the Panhandle,” he continued. “The issue was health care. Being able to see a doctor, fill a prescription, be well are just so fundamental. Talking to these farmers, who are trying to make ends meet on the most narrow of margins. If we lose this, and deport a million Dreamers—and build a 2,000-mile wall…”

With his toothy grin, floppy thatch of hair, and Irish charm, O’Rourke has inevitably drawn comparisons with the Kennedys. But there’s something else that reminds me of Bobby: his uncanny ability to have it both ways—Mayor Daley and Cesar Chavez. Not only has O’Rourke, a Clinton superdelegate in 2016, now come out for Medicare for All, he’s being guided by a cadre of Sanders organizers. He’s for the farmers—and against big money in politics. Yet he still talks about bipartisanship as an ideal, not as a sordid alibi for corporate power.

If Texans are really lucky in November, they might get to have it all, too: Beto’s long-shot crusade to paint the state purple, and the radical energy of Democratic representatives in Congress who know exactly what they’re up against. A few weeks ago, a headline in The Dallas Morning News advised that if you’re betting on Beto O’Rourke, “Make sure you get odds.” That’s probably still good advice—and even more so for Moser, Wilson, and Treviño.

But that doesn’t mean the other side is a safe bet. Heading back from Marfa, we get pulled over by the police outside of Alpine. “Oh, shit—here we go,” says Treviño, who is trying to get back in time to see his girlfriend. He carefully lowers the passenger-side window and retrieves his license, keeping his hands in sight. The officer, whose name tag reads “Garcia,” walks over, looks across at the driver, tells us we’d been going five miles over the speed limit, then breaks into a grin. “You’re Rick Treviño. You’re that guy running for Congress,” he says. And with that, he sends us on our way.
Aura Hernández fled to the US seeking safety. Instead, she was sexually abused by a Border Patrol agent.

by LAURA GOTTESDIENER, MALAV KANUGA, and CINTHYA SANTOS BRIONES

On a Tuesday afternoon in March, Aura Hernández drew a bath for her daughter, Camila Guadalupe, in a makeshift bathroom tucked inside the basement of a Manhattan church. The water was warm, but the toddler shivered as she stood inside her inflatable hot-pink tub. Hernández smiled at the girl and chuckled. “You know how it feels—the first time in a new place,” she said. “Everything is different. It’s an adjustment.” Indeed, everything was different, both for mother and daughter. One day earlier, the pair had moved into the Fourth Universalist Society of New York, a 120-year-old English Gothic church across the street from Central Park. They had made the dramatic move in an attempt to find safety and to avoid Hernández’s scheduled deportation to Guatemala. Both were still adjusting to the novelty of their new home: the cavernous sanctuary, with its soaring arches and an altar designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany; their overheated bedroom, nestled into a corner of the church’s second floor; the bathroom, with its newly renovated shower just feet from the cast-iron boilers.

Hernández bent down to lather Camila’s hair with shampoo, moving gently but efficiently so as to shorten her daughter’s discomfort. The 15-month-old’s pudgy legs wobbled, but she kept her balance. At last, Hernández wrapped the shivering girl in a towel and navigated the trek from the basement to the second floor. There, she placed Camila gently in her crib and, satisfied that the child was resting, began to explain why she had decided to go to extreme lengths to fight her deportation.

Hernández had come to the United States over a decade ago, she said, fleeing deadly domestic violence. But when she arrived, one of the supervisory agents in a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) station in Texas pulled her aside and threatened to indefinitely detain her 9-year-old nephew, with whom she’d traveled, unless she followed the agent into a private office. Once there, he sexually assaulted her—and vowed to hunt her down if she ever revealed what had transpired.

For many years, Hernández said, she was so traumatized by the experience that she stayed quiet. But recently—under the threat of being detained by the same immigration system in which she’d been sexually abused, and then deported back to a country in which her life is still in danger—she has decided to break her silence. In so doing, she has joined the scores of women from across the United States and the world who have come forward in recent months to tell their stories of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. These women include Hollywood actresses and hotel cleaners, journalists and farmworkers, and their abusers were almost invariably men who had power over them: A-list producers and shift managers, network executives and farm owners.

But largely missing from the #MeToo movement are the stories of women who have been sexually abused by members of the largest law-enforcement agency in the United States: Customs and Border Protection. In such circumstances, the power differential is extreme: The men, often armed, are federal agents tasked with hunting down, capturing, and detaining these women; the women are unarmed civilians who have often survived gender-based violence in their home countries or along the dangerous journey to the US border. And because they are undocumented, speaking out, even many years later, means risking deportation—leading to widespread impunity for abuse by border agents.

But as she sat in her new church bedroom, Hernández said she was determined to go public with her story—to demand justice for herself and for other undocumented women who have suffered similar abuse. She was adamant that the system that allowed her to be victimized while she was fleeing for her life would not be allowed to separate her from Camila and her other child, a son named Victor Daniel. And she was committed to doing whatever it takes to protect the little girl sleeping in a crib just a few feet away.

“I’m here,” she said, “because I’m never going to let anything like what happened to me happen to my daughter.”

The story of how Hernández wound up in Texas, trapped in a room with a border agent, begins thousands of miles away in Guatemala. It
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was the summer of 2005; she was 24, and facing such life-threatening violence that she felt her only choice was to go north, to a place, she’d heard, where domestic abuse wasn’t tolerated. “I never wanted to leave my country,” Hernández said. “I was forced to flee.”

She did this by bus, car, and foot—across parts of her own country and the length of Mexico. For the very last leg, she floated across the Rio Grande River in a red inflatable raft. The trip took two arduous weeks, but when she finally arrived in Texas, she was there for barely 30 minutes before she was apprehended by border agents and driven to the nearby CBP station.

This facility, located in Rio Grande City, is part of a sprawling web of detention centers that have sprung up along the US-Mexico border in recent years to hold immigrants and asylum seekers when they first arrive in the United States. While they look innocuous enough in pictures—like a low-slung suburban bank—lawyers and advocates say these border-region facilities are among the most secretive and least regulated of all jails or detention centers in the nation. The National Immigration Law Center has spent years in litigation simply trying to access surveillance footage from inside some of these places. When video stills from one CBP center in Arizona were finally made public, the law center denounced the “deplorable and unconstitutional” conditions depicted in the images.

In a series of interviews with The Nation, Hernández has described her own experience in the Rio Grande City station as degrading and inhumane. It began in a cell that was completely bare, save for concrete benches, where Hernández waited for hours with her nephew and a few other women as CBP officers called the immigrants out one by one to record their personal information. There was no toilet, food, or water, and the whole facility was freezing. “It was so cold, it burned,” Hernández recalled.

“They treated us like animals,” she added. “They called us ‘illegals, illegals, illegals.’”

At last, Hernández and her nephew were called to a crescent-shaped desk to share their information. It was there, Hernández said, that they encountered a supervisory Border Patrol agent with dark hair and a medium build who eyed her up and down and began “saying obscenities” to her. “What beautiful breasts!” she recalled him telling her. “They’re so big.” As he leered, one of his colleagues—a fat white man, Hernández recalled—began to laugh.

As an abuse survivor, Hernández had an acute sense for when a situation was on the verge of going wrong. “I felt like my heart was going to jump out of my chest,” she said. Yet she continued to answer the agent’s questions, even as he derisively asked her whether she had a husband. She told him she had fled domestic violence—a response that might have evoked sympathy. Instead, after a few more questions, the supervisory agent told Hernández he needed more information from her “in private.”

Years later, Hernández says she still remembers what happened next “as if it were yesterday”: the fat officer laughing even harder than before, as if he knew what “in private” meant; the dark-haired officer denying her efforts to bring her nephew with her and instead shooing the boy back to their cell; the officer’s threatening suggestion that perhaps she wasn’t really the boy’s aunt, that perhaps she was actually engaged in trafficking children. “He told me, ‘If you ever want the boy to get out of here, you’ll cooperate with me,’” she recalled.

For Hernández, the threat carried weight: During the hours in which she was detained, she said, she had seen the agent personally signing other immigrants’ paperwork just before they were released. So she complied, following the agent into a small office with a desk and a
filing cabinet and the window shades pulled low. It was there, she said, that the officer sexually abused her.

In a statement responding to Hernández’s allegations, a Customs and Border Protection spokesperson said: “A full investigation by [the] US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office of Professional Responsibility, the US Attorney's Office, and local law enforcement, was conducted and the allegations against the border patrol agent were found to be unsubstantiated.” The agency refused a request to provide documentation of these investigations.

Nonetheless, lawyers and experts say there is a widespread pattern of sexual abuse perpetrated against immigrants in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security. Over a recent two-year period, immigrants filed, on average, more than one complaint every single day of sexual abuse or assault inside DHS facilities. According to this data, obtained by the group Freedom for Immigrants, less than 3 percent of these complaints were even investigated. (Meanwhile, under the Trump administration, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or ICE, has gained provisional approval to begin destroying its sexual-assault records after 20 years.)

Denise Gilman, the director of the immigration clinic at the University of Texas School of Law, says Border Patrol jails like the one where Hernández was held are among the most unaccountable of all DHS facilities. “These facilities are sort of a black hole,” she said, highlighting how immigrants who dare to report abuse can face many forms of retaliation, including immediate deportation.

Still, the accusations abound. Last year, the American Civil Liberties Union filed claims on behalf of two teenage Guatemalan sisters who asked border agents for help after crossing the border, only to be taken to a CBP field office and then sexually assaulted, one after the other, in a closet. In 2014, human-rights groups filed a complaint on behalf of more than 100 children who suffered abuse in CBP custody; a quarter of the children said they were the victims of physical or sexual assault.

That same year, a border agent apprehended two girls and a woman traveling from Honduras. He sexually assaulted and attempted to kill the woman and her 14-year-old daughter, then kidnapped the other girl and raped her in his apartment. Around the same time, James Tomsheck, then chief of internal affairs at Customs and Border Protection, e-mailed the head of CBP to report a “disturbing” number of sexual-abuse cases “that appear to exist in disproportionate numbers in our workforce.”

Few of these reports ever result in prosecution. But a rare case that was successfully prosecuted in 2002 shows the risks and retaliation that migrant women in the border region can face. In 2000, a Salvadoran woman named Blanca Amaya-Flores was apprehended by border agents in Arizona and then driven by one of the agents, Dennis Johnson, out into the desert. His co-workers watched them leave. Once they were alone, Johnson forced her to perform oral sex on him while she was naked and restrained by handcuffs. He then dropped her off in the middle of the night a few blocks from the border and pointed her in the direction of Mexico.

To this day, Hernández has said that she does not like to discuss publicly the specific details of the sexual abuse she experienced in detention. But what she does say is that when it was all over, the CBP agent issued a barely veiled threat. “He said, ‘I know I’ll never hear anything about this because I have all of your information. And if you ever speak about this, I will find you,’” she recalled. “This is why I didn’t say anything, why I stayed silent.”

Once back in her cell, Hernández said, she was so disgusted that she couldn’t stop gagging. She was overwhelmed by the urge to vomit, but she had nothing in her stomach to throw up, as the detainee had been denied food and water for many hours. “My nephew kept asking me, ‘What’s wrong? What’s wrong?’” she recalled. But she didn’t tell the boy anything. Instead, she remained silent even as the officer walked by the partial glass wall of their cell and, seeing her dry-heaving, laughed.

In the days that followed, Hernández and her nephew were left alone—too alone—stuck in detention as all the other members of their group were released. They stayed until new border agents arrived with another group of captured immigrants, and one of the agents asked why Hernández and her nephew were still in the cell when their paperwork had already been processed. Hernández recalled another agent saying that her release was up to the supervisory agent—the very man, she said, who had sexually abused her. Under pressure from the new agents, she and her nephew were allowed to leave their cell, and then one of the new agents loaded them into a truck and drove them away in the summer heat.

Where is he taking us? Hernández wondered. What is going to happen next?

To her relief, they arrived about 15 minutes later at a small bus station, where the agent handed her a few pieces of paper written in English. According to government documents reviewed by The Nation, one of those papers was a notice to appear in a Texas courtroom, and it was signed by the same supervisory agent who Hernández says sexually abused her.

Years later, Hernández’s nephew recalled that his aunt
seemed profoundly different after their detention. Before, he said, she had encouraged him throughout their long journey through Guatemala and Mexico, cheering him up when he cried and making him laugh by saying they were going to “the Ooooh-sah,” her joking way of pronouncing “the USA.”

He was only 9 years old, so he didn’t understand what had changed. “I just knew something was wrong,” he said. “I remember we were on the bus and she wouldn’t talk…. She wasn’t normal. She was quiet, and I don’t think she slept. She would just stare out the window.”

For nearly a decade, Hernández stayed silent about her experience with Customs and Border Protection. When she first arrived in New York State to join family members, she hid her paperwork away in a drawer—and tried to bury the memories of what had happened. She worked first in a restaurant, then as a housekeeper. She fell in love and gave birth to her son, Victor Daniel. She found humor in adjusting to life in a new country, laughing with her family members when she confused olives for black beans at a party, or when she cooked bacon for the first time and was shocked by the cloud of smoke.

Yet the trauma leached into all aspects of her world. Hernández has described herself in this period as timid and unassertive, which she attributes to the violence she suffered in Guatemala and the abuse while in custody in Texas. If someone told her to do something, she’d do it—even if she disagreed. On her first date with her husband, she told the waiter she’d eat whatever he was eating. “I barely spoke,” she said. “It was like I was delayed, almost like a child, because of all the trauma.”

Still, she managed to create a fragile equilibrium for herself—until, in the fall of 2012, on her way to church, she mistakenly drove down a street that was one-way on Sundays and was stopped by a police officer who reported her to ICE. Suddenly, she faced the very real possibility of deportation. This would mean returning to Guatemala. From there, she’d fled for her life nearly a decade earlier and which, over the ensuing years, had become more dangerous. By 2012, violence was proliferating across the country. The femicide rate was among the highest in the world—and the conviction rate for the women’s killers was between only 1 and 2 percent.

But Hernández’s first fear was closer to home: She was terrified of being sent back to a US detention facility, convinced she’d see the same agent who had abused her in Texas. Hernández was overcome with distress from the moment the police officer pulled her over and she saw his blue uniform—the same color the agent’s had been. “They wanted to send me to the place that was the nightmare of my entire life,” she said.

A therapist who treated her at the time diagnosed her with acute post-traumatic-stress disorder, writing: “Because of the mistreatment at the hands of an American citizen, Aura is suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, body memories, extreme anxiety, and panic attacks.”

As her agony began to alarm her family, Hernández eventually worked up the courage to break her silence, sharing the story of what had happened to her with them. (The Nation has spoken with several members of Hernández’s family as well as the therapist, all of whom confirmed that she told them shortly after the police stop that she had been sexually abused while detained in Texas.) But while her secret was out, a larger problem remained: What was she going to do?

Among the many lessons of the #metoo moment, one of the more pronounced has been just how hard it is for women—even the most powerful and well-resourced—to wrest any kind of accountability from the people who violate and harass them. For women who are poor, disenfranchised, and undocumented, as Hernández was, the possibility of redress slips to almost zero. Nonetheless, when Hernández contacted a lawyer to help with her immigration case, he offered an unusual suggestion: He said that the abuse she had suffered in CBP custody could make her eligible for something called a “U visa,” a special visa offered to victims of certain crimes who cooperate with law enforcement in the investigation or prosecution of that criminal activity. Hernández agreed to try and, shortly after, found herself sitting in her lawyer’s office in front of multiple DHS internal-affairs investigators.

This meeting was not easy for Hernández. “I felt fear, terrible fear,” she recalled. “I felt like they were going to tell me, ‘I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you.’” But she spoke out anyway, denouncing the agent who had abused her by name and recounting what had transpired.

What happened next was… nothing. As is so often the case for women in Hernández’s position, the Department of Homeland security declined to certify her petition for a U visa. “It’s very hard to get these certifications,” explained Barbara Hines, the founder of the immigration clinic at the University of Texas Law School. In many sexual-abuse cases, she said, “the authorities say it was consensual, or pretend it didn’t happen, or transfer the agent, or deport the woman as fast as they can.”

Without the certification, Hernández’s lawyer was unable to file the U-visa petition. Her case stalled and, with it, any hopes for accountability from the DHS as well as a chance to solidify her immigration status. Still, Hernández was allowed to continue living in the United States by attending regular ICE check-ins; she also received a work permit and a driver’s license. As time passed, her life stabilized and, thanks to profes-
sional counseling and family support, she grew more assertive and outspoken. In late 2016, she gave birth to her daughter.

And then Donald Trump took office, and with him an administration that made a priority of deporting all immigrants without status. Despite her regular attendance at ICE check-ins, her thriving family and diligent work life, Hernández was one of these targeted immigrants—a fact she learned at an ICE check-in in late 2017 as she held Camila in her arms. She was enraged. After five years of fighting her immigration case, after reliving her abuse and reporting her attacker to the authorities, she was being told that some unnamed supervisor had said it was time for her to go—that very day.

“They treat me like I’m a criminal, but they are the criminals,” she said. “After everything they’ve done to me, how can they say that I’m the criminal?”

So, rather than given in, she pushed back, mounting such a fierce protest that the immigration officer agreed to postpone her deportation until March 1. With this reprieve, she scrambled to find a new lawyer, who submitted an asylum petition based on the domestic violence she had suffered in Guatemala and resumed work on the U-visa route. But as the clock ticked, it became clear to Hernández that legal maneuvers would not resolve the situation in time. She decided to keep fighting her case from sanctuary.

On March 29, Holy Thursday, Aura Hernández stood inside the sanctuary of the Fourth Universalist Society and, in front of a throng of cameras, declared, “I am not going to keep silent any longer. I’m asking all of you not to keep quiet, to defend your rights and the rights of our children.”

Directly in front of her, resting on a table, was the Unitarian Universalism chalice: a burning flame inside a cup encircled by two metal rings. The church’s senior minister, Schuyler Vogel, explained that the symbol was used throughout World War II as a secret code showing the persecuted where they could find safety. Behind Hernández stood a poster, drawn the night before by her son, reading “Please Don’t Deport My Mommy.”

Away from the limelight, Hernández and her daughter have been settling into their new life in the church, without any idea of when they can leave. Hernández’s 10-year-old son visits at every opportunity, and the two of them play basketball and soccer in the gymnasium in the basement, carefully avoiding tripping over Camila as she crawls across the court.

The church’s congregation and leaders have also begun adjusting to the family’s stay. A year ago, two swastikas were carved into the building’s heavy wood doors after the members voted to make it a sanctuary space. But rather than shrink from the responsibility, the church and its congregation have rallied to help Hernández. Many have volunteered to bring her food, keep her company, and support her nonstop efforts to call attention to her story.

In recent weeks, these efforts have included Skyped-in appearances at conferences and in classrooms, as well as countless interviews and an address to a group of middle-school students who visited her in the church. She also wrote a speech to be read aloud at a Washington, DC, protest against sexual violence by immigration authorities, and she coached her son to speak on her behalf at a march outside Trump Tower in New York City as well as at a recent sanctuary symposium in Washington Heights. Her most recent action has been to help organize a Mother’s Day march to demand freedom for herself and all the other immigrants who have been forced to take sanctuary to avoid deportation and separation from their families.

So far, despite repeatedly denouncing the border agent for sexual abuse, she hasn’t received the type of justice that other women have won through the #MeToo movement. But she’s resolved to keep fighting. After all, despite the odds, a handful of women have successfully denounced immigration authorities in recent years for perpetrating sexual abuse. In March, Salvadoran immigrant Laura Monterrosa was finally released from detention in Texas after publicly accusing a female guard of sexually assaulting her. In 2010, a Guatemalan woman reported surviving an attempted rape by a Corrections Corporation of America guard named Donald Dunn. (The company has since been renamed CoreCivic.) The complaint spiraled into a massive sexual-abuse scandal as a slew of other women came forward, and Dunn was jailed after pleading guilty to assault charges. And in 2002, Blanca Amaya-Flores, the Salvadoran woman who was sexually assaulted by border agent Dennis Johnson, saw him convicted of sexual assault and kidnapping and sentenced to seven years in prison.

“It’s not just me—there are so many women who have suffered this and stay silent because of fear, like I was afraid.”

—Aura Hernández
Betrayal of Beliefs

I very much enjoyed Katha Pollitt’s column “Church of Hypocrisy” [April 16], but I thought I would let her know that not everyone is laughing at the evangelical Christians who support Donald Trump. Some of us who shared that path at one time have been increasingly concerned by the direction in which some of the leaders have been urging their flocks. While we have shuddered at the things we’ve observed these last years, we have been stupefied with horror at the lengths these leaders have gone to support Trump since he acquired the presidency.

Donald Trump has never met a commandment that he did not want to break, including the ones against adultery, bearing false witness, and worshipping false gods (money and profit). But there is one commandment that I wish I could add to the other 10 in the Old Testament: “Thou shalt not be a scumbag.” Trump truly epitomizes how to break that one.

As we learn more about the illegal and immoral things that Trump has been involved in over the years, I keep wondering: What is it going to take before evangelical Christians finally wake up and demand a president who comports himself (or herself) in ways that honor the Bible’s teachings?

Wendy Weidman
Gig Harbor, Wash.

I take considerable exception with Pollitt’s article singling out evangelical Christians as hypocrites. She quotes Michael Gerson saying that “The moral convictions of many evangelical leaders have become a function of their partisan identification,” as if evangelicals are the only ones who overlook the blemishes of a politician they think will support their views on key issues. Maybe evangelicals were looking for a president who did not look down on their beliefs. Similarly, maybe the working folks who supported Trump were looking for someone they thought might have their interests in mind, whether or not it worked out that way.

The framing of Pollitt’s criticism of Southern Baptists’ sexual mores, as well as her essentially calling them racists, reflects a woeful lack of understanding of the activities and positions of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention over the past 50-plus years—as well as regarding the faith that started the abolitionist movement.

Finally, I have worked with some outstanding folks from New York State, but have yet to meet one who made me feel “culturally inferior.”

Rex Carey
Midlothian, Texas

Clarification

In “Church of Hypocrisy,” Katha Pollitt wrote that Rick Warren bars divorce for women abused by their husbands. While the audio clips posted in the “Bible Questions & Answers” section of the website for Saddleback Church, which Warren founded and serves as senior pastor, did feature that injunction, the pastor speaking in the clip is not identified. The page in question has been taken down from the website but is still available through the Wayback Machine.
It can be difficult to read, let alone write about, a posthumous work by a beloved writer. For one thing, such books are often not very good: Consider the lovingly, if haphazardly, collected omnibus of oddments the writer might not have bothered publishing, had they lived; the perpetually incomplete would-be masterpiece wrangled into semi-coherence by well-meaning editors; the half-written draft brought to Frankensteinian life by a collaborator. We read such books with skepticism as well as sorrow; we wonder if our memory of the writer might have been better, purer, had we elected to abstain. Yet we can’t look away. And even if the book is legitimate, fully authored and authorized by its stated creator, and actually, miraculously excellent, we read it through the strange prism of its lastness. Like it or not, it’s the punctuation mark at the end of the writer’s career, and we’ll have to accept that it might serve more as ellipsis or question mark than exclamation point. All the work we hoped the writer might create—every literary apparition we’ve imagined, with the ridiculous but still palpable sense that it might somehow be realized—must be put to rest, so that we can face this final artifact. And once we’ve read it, the writer is truly gone.

I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that Denis Johnson died last year. His...
career was so idiosyncratic, his talents so enormous, so mercurial, that it seemed as though he might be able to produce a brilliant practically anything; you could imagine him writing books forever, in his mutable way, surprising you every time. The son of a State Department official, Johnson was born in Germany and spent his childhood in Washington, DC, and abroad. Before he’d even finished college, he had already published his first book of poems, *The Man Among the Seals*, in 1969. After a few years at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and two more poetry collections, Johnson published his first novel, *Angels*, a stylish, gritty love story showcasing the kinds of outcasts, addicts, and criminals who would populate his fiction for the rest of his life.

Johnson’s next decade was a slow burn: *Fiskadoro*, a hallucinatory novel of nuclear Armageddon; *The Stars at Noon*, a wild, broken pseudo-thriller set in Nicaragua; *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*, a dreamy noir set in Provincetown; and more poems. But even as Johnson became famous in the 1990s, after the publication of his collection of linked short stories, *Jesus’ Son*, he was as likely to puzzle as to astound. It wasn’t that his books failed to conform to expectations; it was that his talent was too slippery to set them in the first place.

*Already Dead*, possibly the most eagerly anticipated book of his career, turned out to be a barely coherent exercise in gothic horror: *The Name of the World*, a ghoulish morsel that readers have in academias; *Tree of Smoke*, a sprawly, wildly plotted Vietnam War saga that chronicled the misery, comedy, and chaos of that conflict through a cast of eccentric characters. After that, we got a series of slimmer works of fiction: the crime story *Nobody Move*, the historical novella *Train Dreams*, and a nihilistic buddy novel set in Africa, *The Laughing Monsters*.

Though Johnson was too well-known to be called a writer’s writer, other writers held him in particular esteem, in part because of his reputation as a kind and generous peer, but also because we all celebrated and envied his boldly multifarious career. Of course, the work we all loved best was *Jesus’ Son*. Unassuming in presentation and readable in one sitting, the book was narrated in a gently self-deprecating, conversational style by a protagonist who, though unnamed, sheepishly lets it be known that people call him “Fuckhead.” Showcasing the chaotic, serendipitous lives of the disaffected and down-and-out, *Jesus’ Son* told their tales in prose that felt both extemporaneous and beautifully, precisely constructed. And the plot twists were legendary: Recall the strangely flirtatious Polish guy on the ferry in “The Other Man,” who steps away for a moment, only to return without his accent… or the man in “Emergency” who strolls into the hospital with a knife sticking out of his eye… or the unexplained passage, in “Work,” of a naked woman dangling from a kite.

Even more striking were the book’s sudden swerves in direction, from the straightforward and unadorned to the wildly metaphoric and self-conscious. “Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill,” Fuckhead tells us in the daring, bewildering final lines of “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” “And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.” Or the penultimate paragraph of “Emergency,” which reads: “That world! These days it’s all been erased and they’ve rolled it up like a scroll and put it away somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers. But where is it?”

For those of us trying to be writers in 1992, these rhetorical feats seemed astounding. They also felt like something we ourselves could pull off if we tried, much to the detriment of our writing workshops, to which we served up sheaves of faux-intuitive short fiction. (Well—I did, anyway. Sorry, old friends.) Johnson himself didn’t help matters; he delighted in telling people that *Jesus’ Son* took about as long to write as it did to type. We all took this to mean that perhaps we, too, could knock out a great book in a couple of weeks.

We couldn’t, of course. Even Johnson couldn’t. *Jesus’ Son* was a sui generis masterpiece, the fortuitous result of decades of Johnson’s life experience and laborious work on other things. (It couldn’t have existed, I think, without those early years as a poet.) The work that followed was often very good, and sometimes superb. But, as much as Johnson’s fans enjoyed these books, they always longed for the miracle of another *Jesus’ Son*. “I’ve gone looking for that feeling everywhere,” Fuckhead tells us in “Car Crash,” a line that also describes what we all desired most: not a sequel, exactly, but something with that same breezy, epiphanic quality, something both familiar and new, something unexpectedly expected.

*The Largesse of the Sea Maiden* is the book. But it isn’t a sequel, or derivative of any of Johnson’s earlier work. It is its own perfect thing, and Lord preserve me, I think I love it every bit as much as I love *Jesus’ Son*.

*The Largesse of the Sea Maiden* takes its title from an opening suite of 10 anecdotes, each narrated by the same advertising executive: a wry, observant man gently dissatisfied with his work and primarily concerned, in these pages, with the inexplicable lives of those around him. In one story, he rather jarringly refers to a group of disabled adults as “cinema zombies, but good zombies, zombies with minds and souls,” and we realize that this is how he sees all people, himself included—stumbling travelers, puzzled by life. He introduces us to a woman challenged to kiss an amputee’s stump, and tells the story of a sexual proposition passed under a men’s-room door; a memorial service produces an unexpected artifact, and a valuable painting is thrown into a fire.

Characters act in “Largesse” with evident conviction, but they don’t understand why; others may or may not be who they say they are. “His breast-tag said ‘Ted,’” the adman says of a stranger at a gathering, “but he introduced himself as someone else.” A phone call from a dying ex-wife results in an emotional apology… but which ex-wife was it, the one named Ginny, or the one named Jenny? These vignettes set the tone for the longer stories to come; they invite the reader to observe without judgment extremes of personality and behavior. There is also the gentleness of the adman’s narration, which carries over into the rest of *Largesse*; the mature Johnson, while still preoccupied with characters downtrodden, marginalized, angry, and insane, has come to view them with a greater sense of compassion. His comedy is sly now rather than shocking.

The adman is only one among many seekers in the collection; the rest of the book gives us four more. “The Starlight on Idaho” is a one-sided epistolary fiction, composed by an alcoholic man, Cass, trying to dry out in rehab. He writes to friends and family, Satan and the pope; some of the letters are rational, others delusional; some we understand to have been mailed, others never sent. “Let’s just face the music and the facts,” Cass writes to a “Dr so and so.” “Somebody’s going out of my mind.” His dictation is awkward, haranguing, self-justifying, self-pitying; he repeats himself, redescribing key details, sometimes copy-
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ing lines from one letter to another. His mantra is “hooks in my heart”: “I’ve got about a dozen hooks in my heart,” he tells his father and grandmother, “I’m following the lines back to where they go.” This syntactic paradox, inadvertent on Cass’s part, deliberate on Johnson’s, shows us the circularity of Cass’s thinking, the prison of his addiction and mental illness. The hooks of booze and medicine and love and anger are in him, and the lines ultimately lead back to the self. And yet it’s a hopeful story. “You should be dead,” people keep telling him, but he isn’t, and at the end, when Cass jokes that “I Should Be Dead” ought to be his epitaph, you begin to think that he just might make it.

“Strangler Bob” recalls some of Johnson’s earlier fiction, in particular Jesu’ Son. It gives us a hapless narrator enduring a brief incarceration who seems familiar to us. A couple of pages in, we realize why. “You’re the one they call Dink, right?” somebody asks him, and he replies, “I have another name.” Consider this a wink from the author; that name, we’re invited to surmise, is Fuckhead. The story is a kind of mini-picaresque, its plot twists magnified by the fishbowl that is prison life. But its real strength is its prose: Johnson fully inhabits that old ’90s voice, with its weird intuitive leaps, oblique Nabokovian metaphors, and surprising (and moving) evocations of shifting perspective. The prison is “some kind of intersection for souls” that smells like “disinfectant and something else that was meant to be killed by disinfectant.” We’re invited to see a day there as “slowly unmasking itself as a damnation without end.” A man’s face first appears blank but soon “began to boil and writhe,” while another man “allowed a terrific emotion” to flare up and insists that the room he’s in isn’t his real room. Drawing upon some impossible motifs—writers, twins, madness, memory, the act of writing, their phor for memory and the act of writing, their syntactic paradox, inadvertent on Cass’s way of seeing. Johnson has always seemed to illustrate that memory and mortality and, of course, on his own vocation. To illustrate that his writer, a Johnson-alike, who has come to San Francisco to act as an ad hoc hospice nurse and assistant to his dying friend Link. In a restaurant, the narrator spies a woman who resembles a friend’s wife, so he calls the friend, only to be told that he just died that morning of a heart attack. “I put away my phone,” the narrator tells us, “and managed to write down that much of the conversation in this journal, on this very page, before my hand started shaking so badly I had to stop.”

This gesture—a callback to the writing of the story you are now reading—is repeated a few pages later: “I took out a pen and my notebook and finished jotting a quick account of my recent trip to the restaurant…. I’ve reproduced it verbatim in the first few paragraphs above.” At first, this move feels like a lark; but as it develops, over the story’s many pages, one begins to view it as a kind of cross-examination of the self, a meditation on memory and mortality and, of course, on Johnson’s own vocation. To illustrate that he’s a writer (“I’ll write a story for you right now”), the narrator tells us an anecdote about a strange knee problem he once had that ends in his unexpected employment as a prop on-stage during a medical lecture. This leads him to another story about another sick friend, a novelist named Darcy Miller, and Miller’s caretaker, another writer named Gerald Sizemore—and pretty soon we’re thickly layered in narratives that are ghosts of narratives about middle-aged men caring for older men who are all writers who are not writing, and whose books may not exist.

At one point in his final days, Link sits up and insists that the room he’s in isn’t his real room. Drawing upon some impossible strength, he jumps out of bed “as if gravity had been revoked,” walks out the door and into a thunderstorm, reenters the house through another door, and declares the room right again. It is hard not to read Link as a walking metaphor for memory and the act of writing, their transformative power to push us out into the storm of feeling and bring us back with a new way of seeing. Johnson has always seemed to let his stories lead him where they want to go; in some of his less cohesive work, these wanderings can be fascinating but unsatisfying. Here, the extra layer of self-consciousness, far from complicating matters, brings them into sharper focus: Johnson’s seeking is the narrator’s seeking, is Miller’s, is Link’s, is ours.

It is fitting that the sentences in “Triumph Over the Grave,” the penultimate story in Johnson’s last collection, are some of the finest of his career. Just look at this glorious one about a wake of vultures “beleaguering a carcass too small to be seen in their midst”:

“When we catch sight of one of these birds balanced and steering on the currents, its five-pound body effortlessly carried by the six-foot span of its wings and therefore not quite constituting a material fact, the earthbound soul forgets itself and follows after, suddenly airborne, but when they’re down here with the rest of us, decorating a corpse, brandishing their wings like the overlong arms of chimpanzees, bouncing on the dead thing, tearing at it, their nude red heads looking imbecilically minuscule and also, to a degree, obscene—isn’t it sad?”

This story, bristling with mini-masterpieces like that one, could serve as a fitting end to the book, and as Johnson’s final statement—his own triumph over the grave. Instead, Largesse closes with a wild, hilarious, and mordant story, “Doppelgänger, Poltergeist,” in which a failed writer watches a beloved student, Marcus, descend into the highly esoteric madness of Elvis Presley truerism. Specifically, Marcus believes that Colonel Tom Parker, Presley’s legendary con-man manager, had the real Elvis killed, then replaced him with Presley’s secret twin brother, who, though believed to have been stillborn, was actually whisked away and raised by their mother’s midwife. Marcus’s obsession leads him to spend thousands of dollars on specious documentation and to his arrest (grave desecration), while our narrator looks on in confusion and awe.

The story is flasdy positioned, repackaging all the book’s themes and motifs—writers, twins, madness, memory, hauntings—as barnstorming dark comedy. It’s Fat Elvis to the earlier stories’ Hot Elvis—or, better yet, it’s an Elvis impersonator, the best you’ve ever seen. The story, and the book, and Johnson’s career all end with perhaps the silliest line the man ever wrote, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. For all the miseries Denis Johnson has chronicled—addiction and poverty, war and death, disaffection and anger—“Doppelgänger, Poltergeist,” like the rest of The Largest of the Sea Maiden, invites us to remember him first and foremost with laughter.

The Nation.  
June 4/11, 2018
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not a series of mechanistic interactions but rather a web. “Into a blustery, all-male world of patriarchs and company men, technocrats and cold warriors,” Barnet writes, “walked four women who saw things differently and were unafraid to say so.”

Carson, Jacobs, Goodall, and Waters weren’t friends; they weren’t all of the same generation, and they worked in different fields. But where the men who had made the world of the 1950s saw “strict hierarchies and separations, they saw entities and connections, the world as a holistic system… they saw movement and flow, evolution and process.” Indeed, Barnet tells us, all four “intuitively grasped the overarching idea of ‘connection,’ which is the basis of what we now call ‘web’ or ‘systems’ thinking. If these insights seem self-evident today, it is only because of how thoroughly we have internalized their essence.” Their ideas “not only turned out to be prescient, but culture-changing—the catalyst to a radical shift in consciousness.” There were others—men and women both—who helped push us in the same direction, but these four help us better understand the nature, and the beauty, of that shift.

Rachel Carson was much older than the rest of this quartet, and she was prominent before the ’60s—indeed, her books about the oceans were among the best, and best-selling, of the 1950s. Carson had aspired to a career as a biologist, but her father’s illness left her the sole supporter of her family, and as a result she had to forgo getting a PhD. In 1935, Carson took a civil-service job with the Bureau of Fisheries, which later became a part of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, where she was given the task of writing radio scripts and brochures about marine life. Her first book, Under the Sea Wind, described seabirds and fish in language both technically accurate and lyrical. Yet despite the fine reviews, its impact was effectively scuttled by the outbreak of World War II. Before she started writing about pesticides, however, Carson returned to the sea, producing another manuscript about the oceans. This time, it caught the eye of Edith Oliver, a shrewd longtime presence at The New Yorker, who persuaded managing editor William Shawn to excerpt most of it. The check from the magazine, for $5,200, equaled Carson’s government salary for a year, and so she quit to become a full-time writer.

Since I was born during the short window between John F. Kennedy’s election and inauguration, I can claim with technical accuracy to be a child of the ’60s. True, my main accomplishment over the next 10 years was learning to ride a bike, but the iconography of the decade is so inescapable that I’ve always felt as if I actually knew what it was all about: raised fists, civil-rights and antiwar marches, hippies, the Beatles, the hair—an epoch of resistance.

Bill McKibben is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in Environmental Studies at Middlebury College and the founder of 350.org. His most recent book is Radio Free Vermont.

Andrea Barnet’s new biography of four women who helped shape that era rewrote that definition a little for me—or at least broadened it. One thing that unites Rachel Carson, Jane Jacobs, Jane Goodall, and Alice Waters is, of course, gender. But (perhaps in part because of that fact) what really makes them fit subjects for joint consideration is the idea they shared, which was in many ways quite new when they broached it in the ’60s: that the world, both natural and human, is a web.
Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit mother of five, was murdered by three Klansmen during the Selma to Montgomery Freedom March in 1965. Jim Turner offers an insider’s view of the three trials that took place over the following nine months—which finally resulted in the conviction of the killers. Despite eyewitness testimony, it took a team of Civil Rights Division lawyers, led by the legendary John Doar, to produce the landmark jury verdict that Klansmen were no longer above the law. This is must reading today, as the voting rights won in Selma come under renewed attack.

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Unaffordable American Healthcare From Johnson to Trump
BY JONATHAN ENGEL

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earned her the National Book Award. Its sequel, *The Edge of the Sea*, was another considerable success. Had Carson’s work stopped there, she would have left an imprint: She had helped open up 70 percent of the planet for humans to contemplate, understand, and enjoy. What Jacques Cousteau would later do with a camera, Carson did first with just a typewriter.

But she didn’t stop there. The stories about the harmful effects of the powerful insecticide DDT, which she’d known about at least since the war, had always nagged at her. First she tried to persuade E.B. White to take on the issue (he had written on the question of nuclear fallout before), but when he demurred, Carson continued to investigate the dangers of the ubiquitous pesticide on her own. (Among other things, DDT was sprayed from the air over football stadiums before big games to keep the mosquitoes down; pocket-size dispensers were also sold for carrying in golf bags.) As she worked on the book that would become *Silent Spring*, Carson was diagnosed with breast cancer, beginning a race against time. In the summer of 1962, *The New Yorker* began to serialize the book, and *Silent Spring* was published that fall to a cascade of plaudits—as well as a full-blown assault by the chemical industry, which tried to discredit Carson as an “anti-business” subversive who lacked professional scientific credentials. The kind of public-relations campaign that the tobacco and oil industries later perfected had its crude birth in the response to *Silent Spring*.

The chemical industry was right to be alarmed. The book, Barnet writes, was “more than a polemic about the perils of synthetic pesticides; it was a critique of the values of the 1950s: its love affair with technology, its deference to big business, its scientific elitism, its mania for national security, its increasing disconnection from nature.” When Carson testified before the Senate, her composure and gravitas left a strong impression on committee chairman Abraham Ribicoff. She made an equally important appearance on *CBS Reports*, where, as Barnet notes, nearly 15 million Americans saw her “answering every question with calm deliberation, never sounding anything but thoughtful throughout.” Though she’d been careful and detailed in her critique of pesticides, Carson concluded the program on a more philosophical note. “We still talk in terms of conquest,” she said. “We still haven’t become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a very tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. Now I truly believe that in this generation we must come to terms with nature.”

It’s hard to imagine what a thoroughly bizarre operation urban planning had become in the 1950s and ’60s. If the chemical industry thought that wiping out a broad array of pests would produce a happy society, many of the world’s architects thought that standardizing our surroundings could achieve that end as well. Oscar Niemeyer, for instance, was designing Brasilia from scratch, with separate zones for work, pleasure, and habitation. The low-density, car-dependent suburb had also become a favored form of the era, and giant public-housing towers were seen as an antiseptic answer to slums.

Barnet opens her section on Jane Jacobs with an account of Jacobs’s visit to Philadelphia to meet Edmund Bacon, the local version of New York master planner Robert Moses. Jacobs recalled Bacon greeting her at the city’s grand train station. Then he took her to an area where loads of people were hanging around on the street, on the stoops, having a good time of it…and he said, well, this is the next street we’re getting rid of. That was the “before” street. Then he showed me the “after” street, all fixed up, and there was just one person on it, a bored little boy kicking a tire in the gutter.

“Where are the people?” Jacobs asked. “They don’t appreciate these things,” Bacon replied.

Excitedly he explained the need for order in the crowded and unruly downtown, the importance of providing a “view corridor.”

Bacon’s vision of an orderly and uncluttered city was more than just dogma found in many academic journals; it wrecked neighborhoods across the nation and around the world. Jacobs—then a young editor at *Architectural Forum*, but not a part of the profession’s establishment—was one of the few who resisted this view of the city; indeed, she spent the next couple of decades pointing out that the kind of cities imagined by Bacon and Moses had no street life. She asked how these places felt to those who lived and worked in them, and she asked that question impertinently and persistently.

Jacobs’s breakthrough piece came in 1958, with an article called “Downtown Is for People” that appeared in *Fortune*, which outlined her emperor’s-new-clothes take on urban renewal. “Letters of praise poured into *Fortune* in unprecedented numbers,” Barnet tells us. Careful readers will note a pattern here. As with Carson, an overlooked and under-credentialed observer used the wonderfully edited general-interest magazines of the era, then at their height of popularity, to advance her ideas at length and with enough reach to reconfigure a national debate. But unlike Jacobs, Carson had plenty of time and strength left to see her ideas through. She published her blockbuster, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in 1961, by which point she was already engaged in a series of fights with Moses over the shape of Lower Manhattan, where she lived. First there was the epic battle to keep Washington Square Park from being cut in two by an extension of Fifth Avenue. “There is nobody against this,” Moses had insisted to the city’s Board of Estimate. “Nobody, nobody, nobody but a bunch…of mothers.” Led by Jacobs, who organized children’s picnics, “reverse ribbon-cutting” ceremonies, and dozens of other media-savvy stunts, the mothers prevailed. Much the same thing happened a few years later, when Moses’s successors tried to designate the West Village a slum and clear it for urban renewal, and again when Soho was threatened with a highway.

It’s impossible to imagine New York now if Jacobs hadn’t thought, and fought; hundreds of other cities also bear her mark. Her triumph was intellectual as well as political. Jacobs offered us a view of cities as “complex organisms that made themselves up as they went along.” In *Death and Life* she insisted, as Barnet puts it, that “vibrant cities were continuously adapting over time, in response to the external environment, just like other natural systems.” In fact, her insight proved so spot-on, and the cities it produced so attractive, that this very attractiveness has become the problem we call gentrification. But that’s a dilemma for a different decade. Barnet has done well to place Jacobs alongside Carson as a powerful challenger of the entrenched orthodoxy of a proud but blinded power structure.
Arnold’s third subject, Jane Goodall, fits this template too, though she was a generation younger. Goodall loved nature and didn’t care for school; in search of adventure, she started looking for secretarial work overseas, and nearly by accident ended up working for Louis Leakey, the maverick anthropologist then on the cusp of his great discoveries in the Olduvai Gorge. Leakey had long wanted to know more about the lives of the great apes, which had scarcely been studied in the wild—the few exceptions were a series of expeditions that looked more like military operations and traumatized the chimps under study, causing them to flee into the forest. (Those that didn’t escape were often slaughtered so their stomach contents could be inspected.)

Goodall, of course, pioneered an entirely different way of working. She went to Gombe, at one end of Lake Tanganyika, and after long and arduous months—much of that time spent simply sitting so that the chimps would learn to tolerate her—she began to identify and then to understand the individual animals. They constituted “a society connected by a web of relations and interdependencies,” as Barnet puts it, adding: “it was an approach akin to that of Jacobs, who argued that generalizations about cities got one nowhere. It was only by observing the unique and particular features of individual blocks...that one could possibly get a sense of how the city as a whole worked.”

Goodall also observed something truly remarkable: chimps making rudimentary tools to get at termites in their mounds. When she told Leakey, he was stunned: “in his wildest musings he hadn’t imagined a breakthrough of this caliber or import,” an observation that knocked humankind off one of its imagined pedestals. Though somewhat on the fringes of academia himself, Leakey knew that, to be taken seriously, his young assistant would need credentials, so Goodall was dispatched back to Cambridge to get her doctorate. At the first conferences she attended to present her findings, the primatologists—male great apes themselves—ignored or condescended to her. Among the charges lodged against her: Goodall was an amateur; she had given her subjects names; she proceeded by anecdote. But Goodall had the same weapon as Carson and Jacobs: the general-interest magazine—in her case, National Geographic. When “My Life Among Wild Chimpanzees” was published in 1963—two years after Death and Life and a year after Silent Spring—replete with pictures of the ponytailed Goodall and the toolmaking chimps, readers were predictably “enchanted. Within days,” Barnet writes, “Jane was buried in messages from friends, letters from readers from around the globe, solicitations from publishers and journalists.” It’s a fame that has never really abated and that she has put to remarkable use as a perennially effective spokesperson for conservation.

Arnold might have done well to end her volume there, because Alice Waters, her fourth subject, doesn’t quite fit, temporally or intellectually. Barnet has tried to shoehorn her in, arguing that Waters reached some of the insights that would eventually revolutionize American cooking during an undergraduate trip to France in 1965, but that’s a stretch. Mainly she learned what she liked to eat. Nor did Waters really break through until the 1970s. She opened Chez Panisse in 1971, and it was some years later that her insistence on local sourcing opened the eyes of many people in America. For that reason, I’d suggest that readers skip this section of Barnet’s book and instead head straight for Waters’s own account, published last year.

Coming to My Senses is as compelling a book about the 1960s as I’ve ever read. If the decade had a geography, Berkeley was one of its capitals, and Waters knew everyone and everything. She worked for the underground papers; she was on Sproul Plaza when Mario Savio launched the free-speech movement; she went to the art-house movies; she volunteered for an antiwar congressional candidate; she took lovers who were themselves central players in the era. There’s nothing sentimental in Waters’s account, nor is there anything lurid—it’s the lived experience of a fascinating moment in time, told by someone whose expertise is simplicity laded over with nuance.

“Even though I shared a lot of counterculture values,” Waters writes, “I never connected with the hippie culture... I didn’t want anything to do with the hippies’ style of health food cooking: a jumble of chopped vegetables tossed together with pasta—throw in a few bamboo shoots and call it a Chinese meal. To me, that world was all about stale, dry brown bread and an indiscriminate way of eating cross-legged on couches or on the ground with none of the formality of the table.”

What Waters wanted looked at first more like France—a carefully built menu of the day, a comfortably elegant place to enjoy it—and then like Northern California, which, in turn, took on the shape of her particular tastes. She was running a “counterculture restaurant,” as she calls it, but she also succeeded in reshaping the culture—and in that respect, she is certainly the equal of Carson, Jacobs, and Goodall. And Waters, too, became an activist: Her Edible Schoolyard project continues to change the way that children eat at schools across America, and it’s hard to imagine the slow-food movement becoming as big as it has without her backing.

Barnet, of course, is interested in showing that gender had a good deal to do with the similar philosophies these women produced. She reminds us how rare it was for women to be taken seriously in the 1950s, which meant that they didn’t need to take the prevailing ideologies seriously—they weren’t members of the ruling cults. Rather, “each displayed a profound respect for intuition and the wisdom of direct engagement”; they were comfortable with disorder and messiness. “Instead of the false neutrality of the design theorist or the traffic engineer, the agricultural technician or the academic zoologist, each of these women used the felt and observed as the template upon which to build her ideas.”

It seems reasonable to agree with this basic point, even though there are plenty of counterexamples on both sides. (As Barnet notes in passing, the conservationist Aldo Leopold prefigured much of Carson’s work on the world’s inescapable interrelatedness. Meanwhile, the most influential female writer of the period may well have been Ayn Rand, and whatever else one says about her, the organic web of life was not her jam.) It’s also true that this is a very white book, one that ignores the most important explosion of the 1960s: the civil-rights movement. Barnet could have drawn from its cadre to demonstrate that the view of interrelatedness was central to the political activism of the era—in particular, the struggle for racial equality. An obvious choice would have been Ella Baker, a “web” thinker in her own right, who recognized that broad social movements did not depend on the charisma of a few great leaders, but instead required communities mobilized around their collective interests and organized in broad-based and nonhierarchical structures.

In any event, Barnet’s thesis seems correct. These four gave their moment—and ours—a unique and compelling way to perceive the interconnections within a society, as well as its relationship to its surroundings. We will always need the perspective of outsiders, of unsocialized, uncredentialed nonexperts, in order to see what plainly needs to be seen. Carson, Jacobs, Goodall, and Waters were and are geniuses, extraordinary spirits, remarkable souls—just the kind of people rarely produced by the normal order of things.
In the Fade, Fatih Akin’s powerful new film, starts and closes with deadly bomb blasts. In the opening scene, a nail bomb goes off in what is presumably Hamburg’s immigrant-populated Altoona district; in the film’s shocking finale on a Greek island, an identical charge strapped to the protagonist’s chest immolates her and her family’s killers. This seems appropriate, as In the Fade’s subject matter is equally explosive: the murderous violence of the German far right—ruthless, Hitler-adulating neo-Nazis whose underground networks in Germany, as well as their proximity to the country’s political parties and security services, have long been dismissed as the stuff of conspiracy theory.

Germans tend to pride themselves on having expunged the toxic nationalism of Nazism. But In the Fade offers a bitter indictment of this reckoning with the country’s past, which has tailed off since reunification. Evidence of this came in the most recent elections, which landed a far-right party in the Bundestag for the first time ever. Akin’s film, however, delves into the militant culture that thrives in the lee of these “polite populists,” as the party’s educated leaders are called, and the tragedy of its victims and their families.

Since Akin’s debut in the late 1990s, the lives and struggles of Germany’s three generations of foreign newcomers have been at the heart of his prodigious oeuvre. Akin’s films range in genre: He has made comedies, thrillers, documentaries, and historical dramas. But at the center of many of them are the hybrid worlds of Germany’s inner cities, whose dwellers and street cultures no longer fit the simple categories of “immigrant” and “native German.” More than one critic has likened Akin to the postwar German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, known for his unflinching directness and portrayal of those on society’s margins; not unlike Fassbinder, Akin intends to show how the marginal isn’t marginal at all, but reflects Germany as a whole.

Identity is in flux in Akin’s films. His characters have one foot planted firmly in Germany—unlike many in their parents’ generation—but they also maintain a toehold in Turkey or elsewhere, sometimes in spite of themselves. Though they’re more comfortable in Germany than in their parents’ native land, they find that they’re not fully accepted as members of either place and are forced to traverse the boundaries of the new Germany, careening into conflict with its prejudices, on the one hand, and their parents’ old-world expectations, on the other.

Head-On, Akin’s most widely acclaimed film to date, zeroed in on two German-Turkish characters, the twentiesomething Sibel and the much older Cahit, who meet in a psychiatric clinic after their suicide attempts. Sibel, a vivacious free spirit, chafes under the restraints imposed by her traditionalist parents and controlling brother. Cahit is a self-destructive alcoholic who collects empties in a late-night club; he can barely keep his life on track, and indeed he often doesn’t. Cahit’s Turkish is worse than rusty, and he rails against the country’s Turks as “stupid Kanaken,” a German ethnic slur aimed at Southern Europeans.

While Cahit is no catch, Sibel latches on to him and proposes: Just about any Turkish man will fit her bill, since the purpose of the marriage is to escape from her suffocating family. This marriage of convenience does carry a small price, however: a traditional Turkish wedding where the two apostates make it through only by plying themselves with cocaine. They do eventually fall in love, but it’s too late: Cahit kills one of Sibel’s lovers in a bar fight and is sent to jail. After another suicide attempt, she flees her family in Hamburg for Istanbul, where she settles down, finds another partner, and raises a child—ultimately, an admission of failure. Years later, after finishing his sentence, Cahit too returns to Turkey, leaving the impression that these troubled souls will never find a place to come to rest.

This sense of homelessness features in Akin’s other films as well, and it’s a central theme in In the Fade. But Akin’s new film stands apart from his earlier work: It’s told from a mainstream-German perspective, not from the fringe. At the center of the plot is Katja Sekerci, a German woman in her 30s, and what remains of her family after a neo-Nazi bombing claims the lives of her German-Kurdish husband and their 5-year-old son. (For Katja, the catastrophe strikes “out of nowhere,” aus dem Nichts, which is the film’s worthy title in German. In the Fade, by contrast, which is taken from the title of a Queens of the Stone Age song,
The incendiary nature of Akin’s dispatch to his fellow Germans can only be understood against the backdrop of the NSU’s serial murders and a marathon five-year court case that is still ongoing. The group’s long-undetected terror spree and the absurdly drawn-out legal proceedings (after all, the Auschwitz trials lasted less than two years) have exposed an egregious quantity of Staatsversagen, or state failure, that even the country’s harshest critics on the left—who had long accused the German authorities of being “blind out of the right eye”—couldn’t have imagined before the facts of the case (at least those that we currently have) came to light. In the NSU trial, more is at stake than the fate of the accused trio’s one surviving member. Germany itself—its security and justice branches, and its vaunted processing of the past—is on trial as well.

The core members of the NSU terror cell—Uwe Mundlos, Uwe Böhnhardt, and Beate Zschäpe—were all well-known regulars of the 1990s neo-Nazi scene in the eastern city of Jena, which took root after the fall of the Berlin Wall and stood out for the incendiary nature of Akin’s dispatch to his fellow Germans can only be understood against the backdrop of the NSU’s serial murders and a marathon five-year court case that is still ongoing. The group’s long-undetected terror spree and the absurdly drawn-out legal proceedings (after all, the Auschwitz trials lasted less than two years) have exposed an egregious quantity of Staatsversagen, or state failure, that even the country’s harshest critics on the left—who had long accused the German authorities of being “blind out of the right eye”—couldn’t have imagined before the facts of the case (at least those that we currently have) came to light. In the NSU trial, more is at stake than the fate of the accused trio’s one surviving member. Germany itself—its security and justice branches, and its vaunted processing of the past—is on trial as well.

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Over the next 11 years, the trio, aided by a nationwide coterie of abettors, plotted nine more executions in seven cities (using the same weapon, which became their signature); participated in the robbery of 15 banks; and detonated two bombs. The nail bomb that exploded in downtown Cologne on June 9, 2004, in front of a Turkish barbershop, injured 22 people, four of them seriously.

Even as the incontrovertible evidence mounted, German authorities insisted for years that the murders had been carried out by the Turkish mafia or by enemies of the victims within immigrant circles. Investigators hounded the victims’ families, exhibiting a racism in their procedures that wasn’t confined to backwater police stations in eastern Germany. Key evidence was ignored, or not forwarded to colleagues, or destroyed, implicating the police and security services. Testimony that pointed to NSU sympathizers was also kept secret.

The authorities didn’t turn their full attention to the NSU until it distributed a video boasting about its decade on the run. Around the same time, police officers investigated a suspicious camper van at the edge of Eisenach, a town in the central German state of Thuringia. In it were Mundlos and Böhnhardt, along with an arsenal of weapons and ammunition. According to the investigating officers, soon after their arrival, they heard shots within the camper, and flames erupted from the vehicle’s roof. Mundlos and Böhnhardt were found dead inside. Days later, Zschäpe turned herself in.

What happened that afternoon in Eisenach, and afterward with the vehicle and other evidence, is the stuff of legend, with a vast array of theories cropping up on the role of the Thuringian police, the involvement of undercover agents in the right-wing scene, and the depth of the neo-Nazi network that aided the trio. To this day, despite years of investigation by a parliamentary committee, independent inquiries, and 400 days of courtroom proceedings, as well as interviews with over 500 witnesses, there is still no clear and straightforward explanation for why and how such a farce could have happened—and what steps should be taken to prevent it from happening again.

As disturbing as it is, In the Fade captures just a snippet of this horror. Two people die in the movie, not 10, and the perpetrators are swiftly apprehended and face trial soon after the attack. They’re caught so quickly in the film because one of the bombers’ fathers informs on them to the police. Astonishingly, during all their years underground, this never happened with the NSU trio: No friend, relative, or neighbor—people who must have known what was happening—tipped off the authorities. This complicity is yet another of the deeply unnerving elements in the whole NSU tale, and the contrast between it and the way In the Fade ends adds a grim final note to the film.
Puzzle No. 3467
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1 Darkness at Noon, e.g.: story excerpts in digital sample? (5,7)
9 Hatch a goose egg right before unfinished external layer (5)
10 Acknowledge and return witty remark involving company executives at first (9)
11 Kelly green on the radio is colorless (9)
12 $1,000 is second sign of affection (4)
14 Circle unfamiliar area? Yes, allowing movement in a specified direction (3-3)
15 Coffee is a mysterious gift to almost all of the others like this (8)
17 Cross composer with, um, tourist (8)
19 Audibly express frustration at critical personality (6)
20 Property of diminutive butts? (6)
22 Johnny’s money (4)
23 Ordinary quarrel for one appearing in court (9)
24 Agree to move around like a beaver? (5)
25 Fuss with part of a guitar (4)
26 A crazy teal eating another bird is out of the ordinary (9)
28 Master what you need for survival in the city (6,6)

DOWN

1 Swimwear is what you think? (5)
2 Uncooked pie with rabbit (not hot) (7)
3 Large and small garments—they are often depicted by artists (10)
4 Flakes, perhaps, prior to entering Berkeley (6)
5 Growth in fold (8)
6 Epic yarn from Down Under? A lot of fun (4)
7 Brilliant star is not joking, we hear (6)
8 Unfortunately, Tom’s invested in an inheritance: a diamond, perhaps (8)
13 Porn merits rough punishment by the government (6,4)
14 Choose to accept spies on the inside, with contact person? (8)
16 Model employee delayed (8)
18 Property of diminutive butts? (6)
20 One shrinking in fear from cold impostor (7)
21 Gift given temporarily, following thanks (6)
24 Dismisses a line in a letter that has been sent back (5)
25 Fuss with part of a guitar (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE No. 3466

M E P I S F S
I M A R R I A G E I S O U T
F O R D P I N T O G E T
I G A S M L B E
T H E N R A F I R E W A L L
E N L L A
W E D O N L Y Y O U T L A W
E A N N A N
A N
C A S U A L T Y A C C E N T
R I T H W A L E
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