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D.D. GUTTENPLAN
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For Justice in Palestine

This September marks the 25th anniversary of the Oslo Accords, which were heralded by many at the time of their signing as the dawn of a new era in the Middle East, one in which Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization would replace conflict with negotiations that would lead to peace and a Palestinian state.

Some observers at the time—including Edward Said, in this magazine—pointed out the flaws in that 1993 declaration, among them that while the PLO recognized the state of Israel and renounced violence, the accords never mentioned Israel’s occupation, never noted the illegality of Israeli settlements, and contained no promise—or, indeed, even any mention—of a Palestinian state as the end result of talks.

Whatever its virtues or flaws, the Oslo “peace process,” which has been on life support for years, is now dead. There have been no negotiations since the collapse in 2014 of the last set of talks, shepherded by Barack Obama’s secretary of state, John Kerry, and there is no sign of serious talks in the foreseeable future. What we have seen, instead, is a shocking deterioration of Palestinian life under the most right-wing government in Israel’s history.

Benjamin Netanyahu, now Israel’s longest-serving prime minister, is on the verge of achieving a long-cherished goal: not only the destruction of the Oslo process but the snuffing out of the last chance for a two-state solution to the conflict. His government’s settlement expansion, which both Kerry and US negotiator Martin Indyk have said was a key reason for the breakdown of talks, has killed hopes for that solution by carving the West Bank into noncontiguous bantustans. At the same time, Israel’s repeated military attacks on the imprisoned people of Gaza have severely damaged the strip’s infrastructure; the UN says it will be unlivable by 2020.

Intensified Israeli repression has also been directed at the Palestinian citizens of Israel, roughly 20 percent of the population. The government has repeatedly demolished Bedouin communities in the southern Negev region in an attempt to force their inhabitants into a few designated towns, thus allowing expansion of Jewish housing into formerly Bedouin areas. And in July, the Knesset passed the so-called nation-state bill, which proclaims that “Jerusalem, complete and united,” is the capital of Israel; that “the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people”; and that “the State views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value.” The law also declares that “Eretz Yisrael” (which encompasses all of historic Palestine) is the historic homeland of the Jewish people. As Rashid Khalidi points out at TheNation.com, “The result is a law that negates the very existence of the Palestinians and their national rights anywhere in Palestine, and not just within the infinitely elastic frontiers of the state of Israel.” As Khalidi also notes, apartheid may be an apt description of the current order, but in Gaza the plan looks more like annihilation.

The United States has never been an honest broker in the Middle East. But since Donald Trump’s inauguration, Washington has thrown out even the pretense of balance. Trump has dropped the long-standing US commitment to a two-state solution, and he has tapped as his Middle East envoy and ambassador to Israel two men, Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman, who have personally supported Israeli settlements. Trump has recognized Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, illegally annexed in 1967, and moved the US embassy there—at a time when Israeli soldiers were shooting hundreds of Gaza Palestinians peacefully demanding their right of return. In an act of exceptional cruelty and malice, the Trump administration has also cut off all funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which provides desperately needed aid to millions of Palestinian refugees, as well as $200 million in economic aid to Palestinians and to hospitals in East Jerusalem. And the administration has shut down the PLO mission in Washington. Given this all-out assault, it’s...
A Breach of Trust

Julia Salazar won, but she wasn’t always truthful.

On September 13, first-time political candidate Julia Salazar—dubbed “the next Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez” by a number of media pundits—did something astonishing. Despite an exhaustive legal challenge by her opponent contesting the length of her residency in New York State, followed by weeks of negative media reports questioning key elements of her biography as well as her role in a bizarre scandal involving the ex-wife of baseball player Keith Hernandez, a childhood neighbor, Salazar ousted veteran State Senator Martin Dilan in the Democratic primary by 17 points. How did this happen?

Like Ocasio-Cortez but to an even greater degree, Salazar ran as a candidate of the Democratic Socialists of America, whose New York City chapter, NYC-DSA, recruited her for the race. (Full disclosure: I am a member of that chapter.) According to her campaign manager, Tascha Van Auken, who is also a member of NYC-DSA, Salazar’s win was made possible by two things. First, she ran on a democratic-socialist platform and spoke to the material needs of her district’s residents, unapologetically championing policies like universal rent control and universal health care. Second, after having run two major electoral campaigns in Brooklyn last year, NYC-DSA had developed the knowledge and capacity to build a huge field operation on Salazar’s behalf.

In all, 1,883 volunteers (not all of them DSA members) signed up for 4,663 canvassing shifts. Over the course of the campaign, they knocked on more than 120,000 doors and talked to 10,000 voters. The number of volunteers came as a surprise even to Van Auken, who compared it to the level of enthusiasm she’d seen during her work with Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign in Pennsylvania. “We regularly had weekend shifts with 100 people coming to canvass for Julia, and 20 to 30 people showing up on weeknights,” Van Auken said. With such an imposing ground game, it’s no wonder that voter turnout in the district was more than 250 percent higher than in 2014.

By contrast, Salazar’s opponent was one of the top recipients of campaign funding from the real-estate industry in the State Senate, though his actual constituents were considerably less enthused. One NYC-DSA member reported that a paid Dilan canvasser told Salazar supporters on primary day that he’d voted for her instead of his own employer, because politicians “need to fuckin’ listen, and you guys listen.”

Salazar and her platform inspired people. And that’s why the media reports of her personal dishonesty, which battered her campaign in August, came as such a shock—and why the continued attempts by some of her supporters to minimize them are shortsighted. It’s true that several of these controversies were cruel hatchet jobs, such as when The Daily Caller outed Salazar as one of several women who had accused David Keyes, the English-language spokesman of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, of sexual assault. (Keyes resigned several days later.) Others were harder to parse, like the revelation that Salazar was arrested in 2011 on suspicion of fraudulently attempting to gain access to the bank account of Kai Hernandez, the soon-to-be-ex-wife of Mets legend Keith Hernandez, while house-sitting for her. (Kai had also accused Salazar of stealing from her home, though Salazar was never charged and later filed a defamation suit against her.)

Sadly, there was more to the reports of Salazar’s dishonesty than just sensational hit pieces and right-wing smears. The fact is that many of the claims that Salazar made about herself during the campaign were simply not true. She said on several occasions that she was a Colombian immigrant who had been brought to the United States as a child, but in fact she was born in Miami. She claimed that she got her first job at 14 to help her working-class family make ends meet, but according to her own mother and brother, Salazar grew up in a large oceanfront home with a well-off family that owned boats and a Jet Ski. Her father, who died when she was 18, earned a six-figure sal-

(continued on page 8)
The House of Representatives appears set to pass a bill stuffed with attacks on the Affordable Care Act, including a provision that would allow companies to stop providing health insurance to employees working between 30 and 39 hours per week.

The so-called Save American Workers Act would do exactly the opposite of what its name suggests, by ratcheting up the already long hours that Americans spend at work. While we’re not at the top of the list of developed countries with excessive work hours—Mexico, Greece, South Korea, and nine others are higher—Americans work about 20 more hours each year than the average. One study in 2016 found that the average European puts in somewhere between 7 and 19 percent less time at work than the average American, which translates to between 30 and 90 minutes less each day. Nearly a third of American employees clock 45 or more hours at work each week, and about 10 million put in 60 hours or more. Americans of prime working age now work 7.8 percent more hours than they did four decades ago.

Part of the problem is that we have so few protections against employers who demand that we keep our noses to the grindstone. Unlike every other developed country, we don’t have a guaranteed right to paid time off for illness, a new child, or holidays and vacation. Even weekends off are a custom, not a rule. And we don’t cap how long our work hours can stretch each week. Overtime-pay requirements can restrain an employer’s desire to keep workers at the factory or in the office for more than 40 hours per week, but except in a handful of industries, there’s nothing stopping our bosses from usurping more and more of our time.

Ironically, these increasingly long work days don’t mean we’re making more widgets or serving more customers. Reams of studies have found that working extra hours increases output only up to a point—that point being somewhere between 40 and 50 hours a week. After that, we get less done. In one recent experiment in Göteborg, Sweden, workers who put in just six hours a day were more productive than those working regular eight-hour shifts. Germans clock the fewest hours each year among developed countries, but you’d be hard pressed to find someone accusing them of being economic slackers.

Not to mention that spending more time at work siphons those hours away from our personal and leisure time. In a 2013 poll about sleep, the United States came in fifth of six developed countries, with the American respondents saying they slept only about six and a half hours every work night, a sharp decrease since the 1940s. It’s tough to cook food, run errands, rest, and spend time with family or friends if work eats up 50 to 60 hours of your week.

There have been a few steps toward addressing this crisis in recent years. The Affordable Care Act’s definition of full-time work as 30 hours or more per week is one of them. More important, the Obama administration changed the threshold for qualifying for overtime pay above 40 hours a week so that millions more Americans would be covered. If employers have to pay their employees more when they stay late, they might urge them to go home instead.

Rather than build on that success, however, the Republicans have torn it down. The Trump administration decided not to defend the overtime rule in court, and last August it was struck down before it went into effect. Now congressional Republicans want to increase the number of hours that count as full-time work. Nearly 66 million people work 40 hours a week and would be at risk of having a single hour deducted from their schedules so they can be legally denied employer-paid health insurance. Meanwhile, the 20 million people who already work between 30 and 39 hours a week would have to scramble to clock more time to keep the health insurance they’re entitled to now.

We can’t reduce overwork by forcing people to make an agonizing choice: Work less and get fewer benefits, or work more to keep the ones you already have. Instead, we must ensure that Americans can opt to work fewer hours while keeping the benefits and pay that they need to survive. We’d still get plenty done. We’d just get more time to be humans, too.

1/3 of Americans work 45 hours or more a week, and 9.7 million work more than 60.

Americans work 7.8% more hours a year than they did in 1979.

The average workday in Europe is about one hour less than in the US.

6.5 hours a night, a drop from the 1940s.

20 million people who work 30–39 hours a week may lose benefits under a GOP plan if they don’t work more.


2018 Infographic: Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz

Images by: Bryce Covert
Striking Gains

On September 7, thousands of housekeepers, waitstaff, cooks, and door attendants at more than two dozen hotels across Chicago walked off their jobs. Their main grievance centered on the practice of hotel management stripping workers of their health care when they’re temporarily laid off during a down season.

“Hotels may slow down in the wintertime, but I still need my diabetes medication when I’m laid off,” one housekeeper told the Chicago Sun-Times.

During the two terms of Rahm Emanuel—dubbed “Mayor 1 Percent” by local activists—workers in Chicago have repeatedly used collective action to improve their employment situations. The Chicago Teachers Union staged two massive strikes, including a historic seven-day face-off with City Hall in 2012, while, over the past year, hundreds of auto mechanics and window washers have successfully gone on strike to demand better wages and health care.

As of this writing, employees at nine downtown hotels have reportedly won contracts guaranteeing year-round health care. Those at 17 hotels remain on strike, while the union, Unite Here Local 1, is threatening walkouts at four more.

“We know that we deserve better,” said the local’s organizing director, Angel Castillo. “We are going to show them we are the face of this city.”

—Chris Gelardi

Reasons to Believe

Ten ways to counter the bad-faith arguments of Brett Kavanaugh’s defenders.

Recently, talking to a panel of five influential Republican women, CNN reporter Randi Kaye elicited a tidy list of reasons why they believed Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh hadn’t done anything wrong; why Christine Blasey Ford, who has accused him of sexual assault, must surely be lying or trying to ruin him; and, simultaneously, why even if she were telling the truth, it wouldn’t be a big deal. In less than three minutes, the panel’s participants delivered a comprehensive and common litany of rationalizations for assault, battery, clothes-ripping, pussy-grabbing, and broad acts of misogyny among some of the most privileged males of our species.

These arguments are specious. I have condensed them into 10 talking points, followed by some well-worn responses that I had the foresight to store in a time machine some 27 years ago, when Clarence Thomas was questioned over Anita Hill’s accusations of sexual harassment.

1. “Look at all the good stuff he’s done; he’s an altar boy and a scout.” Many people who do good stuff also commit terrible wrongs; the question is whether the accused did what his accuser said he did. Have we learned nothing from Larry Nassar and Jerry Sandusky, both of whom were popular sports figures and child molesters at the same time? When actions in one sphere, or appearances like beauty or class or race or the number of advanced degrees, become ciphers for embodied goodness or badness, we are in the slippery realm of profiling and prejudice.

2. “She’s the only one coming forward. If he’d really done it, there would be others.” How many do there have to be? A second woman, Deborah Ramirez, now says Kavanaugh thrust his penis in her face during their time at Yale. But the point is not whether Kavanaugh did another thing at some other time and place. The idea that assault doesn’t count unless it comes in multiples is logic akin to a dog being granted “one free bite.” As the woman who was raped by Stanford University student Brock Turner wrote: “We should not create a culture that suggests [rapists] learn that rape is wrong through trial and error.”

Norr should we forget the lessons of Anita Hill’s experience: It is very hard for witnesses to come forward and present themselves publicly—and even globally—to discuss such intimate and humiliating experiences.

3. “It was 36 years ago. After so much time, she’s still stuck on that?” Funny that, how trauma and PTSD linger so annoyingly, long after the party’s over…

4. “It wasn’t intercourse; it was just a touch.” Ms. Blasey Ford did not allege that she was penetrated. She alleged attempted intercourse—attempted rape by any other name. The common-law definition of battery is harmful or offensive nonconsensual contact with another’s person. Surely Blasey Ford’s allegations constitute “just a touch” of that.

5. “What boy hasn’t done this in high school? You can’t judge a man’s character based on what he did at 17!” Many boys endure surges of testosterone; most retire to their bedrooms, rather than assaulting girls, to relieve themselves. And while, as a legal matter, the lack of a fully developed frontal cortex may indeed mitigate some punishments, it doesn’t excuse a person’s actions outright. It is simply not true that every high-school boy does what Kavanaugh is alleged to have done; nor is every wayward teen the beneficiary of such “boys will be boys” excuses for their bad behavior. When the probation officer in Turner’s case cited his having had to give up a “hard-earned swimming scholarship” as a reason for mitigation, his victim’s response was apt: “If I had been sexually assaulted by an unathletic guy from a community college, what would his sentence be?”

6. “The allegations against Brett Kavanaugh are destroying his life.” It hovers somewhere between privileged arrogance and outright gangsterism to assert that allegations of urgent public interest shouldn’t be put forward if the other party will lose face. If we are to have deliberative fact-
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finding bodies as part of our governance, it is both cynical and corrosive to dismiss those processes out of hand as “lynchings,” “witch hunts,” or “mob rule.”

7. “If it were true, she would have said something sooner.” There are many reasons that victims of sexual assault find it difficult to speak, not just “sooner” but at all. Indeed, the very power of #MeToo is precisely the accumulation of narratives whose telling provides courage as well as corroboration, and without which individual stories might never be connected to others in bringing about broader notions of justice.

8. “Maybe she liked him. Maybe he didn’t pay attention to her afterward. Maybe he went out with another girl and she got jealous.” For those who were born after the Hill-Thomas hearings, it’s worth going back and listening to the transcripts—in particular, the incredible rant from John Doggett III, a Texas lawyer who pilloried Hill as a lonely, pining, spinsterish “erotomaniac.” When Senator Orrin Hatch recently said that he believed Blasey Ford was “mixed up,” all I could think of was his own prior descriptions of Hill as jealous and demented.

9. “An investigation wouldn’t help because it doesn’t matter what anyone else has to say.” This is a particularly cynical form of closed-mindedness, a seeming commitment to a framing of “he said/she said” even when testimonial, forensic, or other kinds of evidence might be brought to bear. It’s an ultra-libertarian way of saying “I don’t care,” a doctrinally rigid manner of asserting “My mind is already made up.”

10. “Who are we to judge?” Who, indeed. “We” are “the people.” And in the present circumstance, it is precisely our democratic duty, and that of our elected representatives, to hold to the highest account—to judge—those who would judge us.

(continued from page 4)

Salazar’s campaign chalked up her bad press to youthful inexperience and a complicated life story, while also blaming the media for putting her under extreme scrutiny and the monied interests supporting her opponent for fanning the flames. It’s understandable that her supporters would feel defensive: Many of them had devoted months of their lives to help get her elected. “You see people working so hard, your mind is blown,” Van Auken told me. “They are there every day because they care really deeply about meaningful change.”

People like this are sometimes referred to as “true believers,” and they are the backbone of any grassroots movement. That’s why Salazar’s breach of trust is so disturbing. The hundreds of hours of labor that won this campaign were donated by people who had faith in the candidate they were fighting for. In people-powered campaigns, such faith is a precious resource. Anything that calls a candidate’s integrity into question is a real threat to any movement that attempts to counter the status quo of untrustworthy politicians.

Van Auken says that the next step for NYC-DSA’s electoral operation is to come up with strategies to prevent another August surprise. “This was a horrible experience for us all,” she says, “and there is a lot we can do to better prepare and better protect campaigns and candidates in the future.” The good news is that the organization has already demonstrated that its platform is extremely effective. DSA’s success doesn’t live or die by any individual candidate.

Meanwhile, the establishment learned something too: Every attempt to thwart the Salazar campaign failed because the incumbent was incapable of matching her grassroots support. While DSA has to work on candidate vetting and communications strategy, the establishment faces a much steeper task: convincing an increasingly activated electorate to support the unpopular policies that have led to outrageous rent increases and growing inequality. My money is on the socialists.

ANNIE SHIELDS

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**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Spitting in the Windrush**

The task force assembled to help certain elderly Britons confirm their citizenship is instead denying it to them, according to the United Kingdom’s new home secretary, Sajid Javid. The Tory government has again decided that many members of the so-called Windrush generation—people from the Caribbean who moved to the UK before their countries gained independence from Britain—are undocumented immigrants, even though they arrived as citizens of the British Empire.

Three people who were wrongly deported have died waiting for the UK to recognize their right to return, and at least a dozen others who stayed in Britain have become homeless after their new status as “illegal immigrants” prevented them from working.

Earlier this year, the British government appeared chastened and apologized to (a very small number of) the affected, promised a “lessons learned” commission and (limited) compensation, and replaced then–Home Secretary Amber Rudd (though the primary architect of the deportation scheme remains Prime Minister Theresa May). But now it’s clear the government will continue to ask citizens to provide documentation that it never issued. The Tory “deport first, appeal later” policy has escalated into a Trump-Tory “deport first, appeal later” replication that it never issued. The government appeared chastened and replaced then–Home Secretary Amber Rudd (though the primary architect of the deportation scheme remains Prime Minister Theresa May).

This became apparent after September’s EU meeting in Salzburg, Austria, where Prime Minister Theresa May presented Britain’s negotiating terms for departure, which were comprehensively and unequivocally rebuffed. The fact that they would be rejected should have come as no surprise. In July, May got her cabinet to agree to proposals whereby the UK would selectively heed some aspects of the European single market (like the tariff-free trade in services) and not others (like the free movement of labor). Not only was the EU never going to accept this, but a significant part of May’s own party was against it.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who consented to the plan before resigning in opposition to it, described it as “polishing a turd.” He had a point. But as one of the leading Brexeters, it was his turd, and the least he could do was clean up after himself.

What turned out to be really shocking, though, was the vehemence with which the EU’s negotiators and heads of state—a group more likely to parse adjectives and convolute in tortuous communiqués—responded. French President Emmanuel Macron said in September, “Those who explain that we can easily live without Europe, that everything is going to be all right, and that it’s going to bring a lot of money home, are liars.” Later, the European Council’s president, Donald Tusk, taunted May with an Instagram post showing him offering her some pastries. “A piece of cake, perhaps?” he wrote. “Sorry, no cherries”—referring to the EU’s insistence that it will not allow the UK to cherry-pick those elements it likes from the single market.

May returned from Salzburg bruised and humiliated. “Throughout this process,” she said, “I have treated the EU with nothing but respect. The UK expects the same.” Meanwhile, the pound fell, and the levels of national indignation went through the roof. Rupert Murdoch’s Sun ran a front-page image of Macron and Tusk as gangsters under the headline EU DIRTY RATS. With echoes of the wartime Winston Churchill, the Express hailed May’s response as her “finest hour.” The Daily Telegraph stashed its upper lip to proclaim: “The UK does not respond to insult…. As if we need lessons on democracy from the likes of the Czech Republic…or Malta.”

May had every right to feel piqued. And strategically, this may not have been a great move for the EU, either—it would be in everyone’s best interests to arrive at some kind of deal, and rudeness won’t help. But the truth is that disrespect had been earned over the previous 18 months, which saw the Tory government negotiating with itself while at the same time weakening May’s ability to maneuver by calling an election that deprived her of a majority in Parliament. The Conservatives have worn out the rest of the continent’s patience by alternately suggesting nothing, putting forward plans that had already been rejected, and refusing to concede anything until, ultimately, they capitulated on almost everything.

There were many reasons why Britain narrowly voted to leave the EU just over two years ago, but central to the argument of Brexit’s principal architects was a fundamental miscalculation by a

**Gary Younge**

**A Small, Deluded Nation**

*Brexit emerged from its supporters’ nostalgia for a supposedly glorious past.*

**“**There are two kinds of European nations,” said Kristian Jensen, the Danish finance minister, last year. “There are small nations, and there are countries that have not yet realized they are small nations.” With Brexit, it’s become painfully obvious that the United Kingdom is among the latter.

In their melancholic yearning for a time long past, those who ran the campaign to leave the European Union had a vision of us marching out, suited and booted, bowler hat on head, umbrella in hand, striding proudly backward into a past of glorious independence. As time goes on, a far more likely scenario is that Britain will be unceremoniously ejected from the EU with its pants down and land flat on its behind. The concern had once been that Britain would get a bad deal; now there’s a growing possibility that it could leave with no deal at all—a state of affairs that would come about more by poor judgment than bad luck.

This became apparent after September’s EU meeting in Salzburg, Austria, where Prime Minister Theresa May presented Britain’s negotiating terms for departure, which were comprehensively and unequivocally rebuffed. The fact that they would be rejected should have come as no surprise. In July, May got her cabinet to agree to proposals whereby the UK would selectively heed some aspects of the European single market (like the tariff-free trade in services) and not others (like the free movement of labor). Not only was the EU never going to accept this, but a significant part of May’s own party was against it.

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There were many reasons why Britain narrowly voted to leave the EU just over two years ago, but central to the argument of Brexit’s principal architects was a fundamental miscalculation by a
nation that has been marinating in postcolonial nostalgia since the 1956 Suez Crisis. Its current leaders kept talking about putting the “great” back in “Great Britain”—a version of “Make America Great Again,” only for a much smaller country with less power that has to go back a lot further in the past. They made no plans for leaving the EU because, like a petulant, entitled teenager, they assumed plans would be made around them.

The prospect of us crashing out of the EU without any kind of deal is prompting some to call for another referendum in the hope that Brexit can be reversed. At present, that seems unlikely, although it is a bit more likely than it was before. Quite what that would mean is unclear. But in the absence of any deal, the health-insurance cards that allow British tourists free health care in the EU would be invalid; a hard border between the north and south of Ireland would need to be erected, throwing a key element of the peace process into question; and contracts with EU companies could be subject to renegotiation, as the UK would become a “third country” overnight. With the possibility of gridlocked ports (goods that were once imported freely would now be more thoroughly checked) and airports (World Trade Organization rules do not cover aviation, and no aircraft is permitted to fly between EU and UK airports without a bilateral agreement), there is talk of stockpiling food and medicine.

For those driven by nostalgia, all this could wind up resurrecting the spirit of the Blitz. May says it is “common sense” for Britain to prepare for a hard Brexit. But common sense, it seems, would have made such preparations unnecessary.

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SNAPSHOT / MOISES CASTILLO

**Caped Crusader**

A boy in a homemade superhero costume clutches a Guatemalan flag as he waits with his father for the start of an anti-corruption march against President Jimmy Morales in Guatemala City on September 20.

**Calvin Trillin**

**Deadline Poet**

TRUMP ON REPORTING A SEXUAL ASSAULT

She didn’t file a police report
When claims were fresh and could be tracked.
And, by the way, the same is true
Of all those chicks that I attacked.

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The prospect of Britain crashing out of the EU without any kind of deal is prompting some to call for another referendum.
A vicious feud has engulfed the Labour Party—why can’t its leader defuse it?
SINCE THE LANGUAGE OF SHAKESPEARE, CHAUCER, AND T.S. ELIOT—each of whom had unpleasant things to say about the children of Israel—lacks a term capable of encompassing the current state of relations between Britain’s Jews and Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, we turn instead to the beautiful Yiddish word broyges. Deriving from the Hebrew for “anger,” a broyges is a dispute or quarrel—with a strong undertone of grudge.

Depending on which side you’re on, the current broyges between Corbyn and the Jews reached its peak on August 23, when the Daily Mail unearthed a five-year-old video of Corbyn telling a pro-Palestinian group that “Zionists...have two problems. One is they don’t want to study history and, secondly, having lived in this country for a very long time, probably all their lives, they don’t understand English irony either.” Or maybe it culminated with Jonathan Sacks, Britain’s former chief rabbi, calling Corbyn’s remarks “the most offensive statement made by a senior British politician since Enoch Powell’s 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech”—a blatant appeal to racism that cost Powell, a Tory MP, his seat in the shadow cabinet. Things were now so bad, Sacks added a few days later, that “the majority of our community are asking ‘is this country safe?’”

At a time when Prime Minister Theresa May’s grip on the Conservative Party is weakening by the day thanks to the Tories’ continuing civil war over Brexit, press coverage of Labour’s anti-Semitism crisis has dominated the headlines. In the case of The Times and The Sun (both owned by Rupert Murdoch), the Evening Standard (edited by former Tory cabinet minister George Osborne), the reliably right-wing Daily Telegraph, and the reliably even more right-wing Daily Mail, that’s hardly surprising. The profound bias of the press here acts to amplify any attack on Labour. But the left-leaning Guardian has been just as engaged, with some of its own columnists leading the attack, a fierce battle on its letters page, and the paper editorializing that “Corbyn bears some responsibility for losing the trust of the Jewish community”—a mild formulation that belies the deep divisions within The Guardian, whose former associate editor, Seamas Milne, is now Corbyn’s spokesman and chief strategist.

How did a party whose previous leader, former Nation intern Ed Miliband, is himself a Jew come to be described, in a common editorial published on the front page of Britain’s three leading Jewish newspapers, as an “existential threat to Jewish life in this country”? Are British Jews really packing their bags? Or, as some of Corbyn’s supporters suggest, is the whole dispute no more than a crude effort on the part of Corbyn’s enemies, on the right and inside his own party, to discredit his leadership?

To answer those questions, we first need to peel apart a few strands of the argument. For American readers, there are also two facts to bear in mind. First, the Jewish community in Britain is tiny: At under 270,000, Jews make up just 0.5 percent of the population, according to a 2011 census—behind Christians (59.3 percent), Muslims (4.8 percent), Hindus (1.5 percent), and Sikhs (0.8 percent). Second, unlike in the United States, Jews in Britain are roughly evenly split between the two main political parties, which means that despite their small numbers, the political loyalty of British Jews is heavily contested and deeply divided. So, for example, when The New Yorker quotes Jewish Chronicle editor Stephen Pollard saying there is “probably nothing” that Corbyn could say or do to resolve his party’s difficulties, the magazine’s readers might well have taken Pollard for a neutral observer, rather than what he is: a brilliant polemicist who has fought battles against the Labour Party’s left from the pages of The Spectator, The Times, and the Daily Mail.

Over its 870-year history, anti-Semitism in Britain has certainly included violence and terror. The “blood libel” accusing Jews of slaughtering Christian children for ritual purposes originated in Norwich in 1144; in 1190, the entire Jewish population of York was massacred. One hundred years later, Edward I ordered all Jews expelled from England, where they were not readmitted until the reign of Oliver Cromwell. But in modern times, British anti-Semitism has been a matter “of rebuff and insult,” not martyrdom and murder. In Trials of the Diaspora, his magisterial history of anti-Jewish bigotry in England, Anthony Julius writes that anti-Semitism here “no longer represents a threat because it no longer speaks for anything that is substantial, anything that could injure or even impede.” To Julius, writing just eight years ago, anti-Semitism in Britain seemed like a relic, operating “by stealth, by indirectness, by tacit understandings and limited exclusions” among a social elite who were themselves on the road to extinction.

Yet alarm bells over the safety of Jews in Britain—and in Europe—have been ringing for some time. The same holds true for the effort to conflate criticism of Israel with racism or, as the Anti-Defamation League’s Abe Foxman once argued, to claim that “anti-Zionism is not a politically legitimate point of view but rather an expression of bigotry and hatred.” Nor have Israel’s defenders hesitated to resort to deeply personal attacks. Back in 2014, Maureen Lipman, a star of British stage, screen, and especially television, announced that she was ending five decades of support for Labour because of Miliband’s decision to back a vote recognizing Palestinian statehood—and for eating a bacon sandwich in public. What makes this latest blowup between Labour and the Jews different from every other blowup is that, this time, Labour’s critics have a point.
The immediate roots of the current crisis go back to 2012, when former London mayor Ken Livingstone, trying for a comeback, told a group of Jewish supporters that Jews wouldn’t vote Labour because they were rich. Though he later apologized—something he’d refused to do after he compared a Jewish reporter to a “concentration camp guard”—Livingstone evidently held a grudge. In April 2016, when Labour MP Naseem Shah was temporarily suspended from the party for a Facebook post suggesting that all Israeli Jews be “relocated” to the United States, Livingstone inserted himself into the dispute—and the headlines—by telling the BBC that Shah had done nothing wrong, because “a real anti-Semite doesn’t just hate the Jews in Israel.” Adding injury to insult, Livingstone also claimed that Adolf Hitler had been a supporter of Zionism.

Corbyn promptly suspended him too, but the incident sparked a fresh outbreak of press attention to anti-Semitism within Labour, partly because Corbyn and Livingstone had long been allies on the party’s left. Since Corbyn’s surprise victory as party leader in 2015, the issue had remained on a low boil. While no one then accused the new leader of Jew-hatred, his longtime support for the Palestinians—as well as, perhaps, the unlikelihood of his ever being more than a fringe figure in British politics—had sometimes led Corbyn into ill-judged pronouncements, such as when he referred to both Hezbollah and Hamas as “our friends,” and unsavory associations, such as his defense of Stephen Sizer, an Anglican vicar who’d been banned by the church from social media after posting an article asserting that Israel was behind the 9/11 attacks.

In light of the Livingstone furor, Labour asked Shami Chakrabarti, who had recently stepped down as director of the human-rights group Liberty, to lead an inquiry into allegations of racism and anti-Semitism within the party. Her report, issued in June 2016, found that although Labour “is not overrun by antisemitism,” there was an “occasionally toxic atmosphere” within the party that needed to be addressed.

Who knows what would have happened if Chakrabarti’s call for prompt action had been heeded? Instead, at the very press conference announcing the report, Corbyn used language that appeared to equate Israel with the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). He then stood by while Ruth Smeeth, a Jewish MP, was reduced to tears by a heckler who accused her of working “hand in hand” with the Tory press to discredit the Labour leadership. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, which had initially been receptive to the report, dismissed it as a “whitewash.”

The perception that Corbyn, despite his long history of anti-racist activism, was at best a bystander to attacks on Jews was heightened by fresh scrutiny of a 2012 decision by an East London council to remove a mural by the California-born artist Kalen Ockerman that depicted a group of bankers—many with large noses—playing Monopoly on the backs of the poor. Corbyn’s response then, it was revealed, had been to defend the rights of the artist. He must not have read Ockerman’s explanation that “some of the older white Jewish folk in the local community had an issue with me portraying their beloved Rothschild or Warburg etc as the demons they are.”

Pressed by the Labour MP Luciana Berger, Corbyn did eventually (this past March) declare that the “mural was offensive, used anti-Semitic imagery, which has no place in our society, and it is right that it was removed.” He later added, “I sincerely regret that I did not look more closely at the image I was commenting on.” Some Jewish supporters of Corbyn—myself included—were inclined to accept his explanation; others felt it was both insufficient and insincere.

The latter group was strengthened by Corbyn’s even more feeble response to reports that, as a backbench MP, he’d attended a 2014 ceremony in a Tunis cemetery that included laying a wreath at the graves of two members of Black September, the Palestinian group behind the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich. Corbyn, who said he was there to honor victims of Israel’s 1985 bombing of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s headquarters, first claimed he may have been present for the wreath ceremony, “but I don’t think I was actually involved in it”—only to modify his position when photographs emerged showing him with a wreath in his hands.

The point of this sorry recitation is that long before the recent dispute over how the Labour Party would define anti-Semitism poured gasoline on the flames, Corbyn had what the British call “form” on the charge of being insensitive—if not indifferent—to Jewish suffering.

Yet it is also undeniable that from the very moment he took over as the Labour Party’s leader, Corbyn’s every effort to move it to the left has met with massive resistance from a large number of his own MPs. In June 2016, the MPs passed a motion of “no confidence” in Corbyn’s leadership by a vote of 172–40. When, just three months later, Corbyn crushed his rivals in a leadership election, winning the support of over 313,000 party members—at a time when the Conservatives, who refused to publish precise figures, were rumored to have under 100,000 members—the internal opposition changed tactics, abandoning a frontal assault for a series of rearguard actions.

In this context, as Matt Seaton recently observed in The New York Review of Books, “Labour’s anti-Semitism crisis is the gift that keeps on giving.” Anyone with more than a passing knowledge of Labour Party politics couldn’t help but notice that many of the loudest voices criticizing Corbyn—Wes Streeting, Ian Austin, Margaret Hodge, Chuka Umunna—were Blairites: loyalists of former prime minis-
ter Tony Blair who, though properly unwilling to contain their outrage over anti-Semitism, had had no trouble supporting their hero’s war in Iraq and no discernible passion over the effects of a decade of austerity on Britain’s poor. As Seaton puts it, “The fight between Corbyn skeptics and Corbyn fans over Jews and Israel has become a ruinous proxy for what is, in its essence, a struggle between social-democrats and socialists for the soul of the party.”

This ongoing power struggle, however, doesn’t excuse Corbyn’s repeated failures to defuse the issue. Jon Lansman, who ran Corbyn’s successful leadership bid before founding Momentum, the left pressure group whose rapidly growing membership makes up Corbyn’s power base within the party, told me, “While I agree it’s possible for there to be a problem and also for it to be used opportunistically—if people are exposing a valid problem, you have to deal with it. And actually, the motivation of the person exposing the problem is irrelevant.”

So why hasn’t Corbyn—or his party—dealt with it? Perhaps because anti-Semitism on the left doesn’t look or sound like right-wing bigotry. Left anti-Semitism presents itself not as prejudice, but as sympathy for the oppressed. Its roots lie not in religious or racial hatred, but in frustration with Jewish particularity and in an exaggerated sense of Jewish power. Its historic high-water mark was the infamous 1975 UN General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism. Though that resolution had more to do with Cold War realpolitik than sympathy for the Palestinian cause, the scars from being told that in a world of nation-states, somehow Jewish nationalism was uniquely evil, uniquely deserving of worldwide condemnation, ran very deep.

Though that resolution was rescinded in 1991—again for reasons of realpolitik rather than any change of heart—the legacy of mutual mistrust remains. Even Jews with no attachment to the Zionist project can be made uncomfortable when the gap between “Israel oppresses Palestinians” and talk of Jewish conspiracy isn’t as wide as it should be. Yet among the internationalist left—which is very much Corbyn’s milieu—the consensus that Israel is simply the oppressor is too strong to leave much room for the history that brought the country into being. But omitting those centuries of exile, persecution, and extermination deprives Jews of our identity.

Another reason, though, has to do with the way Israel’s supporters in Britain continually overlay their hand. In 2017, for example, Corbyn, Momentum, the Jewish Labour Movement, and Labour’s national executive committee all backed a change in the party’s rules to include anti-Semitism in the list of offenses “prejudicial to the Party.” It was a rare outbreak of common sense—right up to the point when, citing the new rule, Labour expelled Moshe Machover, a Tel Aviv–born anti-Zionist Jew whose sole crime was having written an article, “Anti-Zionism Does Not Equal Anti-Semitism,” for the Weekly Worker, the newspaper of the British Communist Party.

Though Machover was eventually readmitted, his expulsion provided ammunition for those—many of them Jews—who argued that the fight over anti-Semitism was always really about restricting criticism of Israel. To connoisseurs of English irony, the dispute between the largely Zionist Jewish Labour Movement and the fiercely anti-Zionist (and pro-Corbyn) Jewish Voice for Labour resembled nothing so much as the contempt displayed by the People’s Front of Judea for the Judean People’s Front in Monty Python’s Life of Brian.

Given the absence of good faith on either side, it was only to be expected that a proposal for Labour to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism would turn into another test of strength among Labour’s various factions. The core definition—a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews”—was merely vague. But it came with a list of possible examples that was problematic enough that even a parliamentary committee suggested “additional clarifications to ensure…freedom of speech.” However, when Labour’s national executive committee did just that—adopting the core definition verbatim, but deleting some of the examples relating specifically to criticism of Israel—all hell broke loose. (A recent move by the US Department of Education, citing the IHRA definition, to reopen a civil-rights case against Rutgers University after it hosted Palestinian activist Omar Barghouti is just the latest illustration of why the definition needs clarification.)

Much of Jeremy Corbyn’s appeal lies in the fact that you always know which side he’s on. In a straight choice between Israel and Palestine, Corbyn is going to choose Palestine every time. For some Jews—or anyone else whose first priority is the defense of Israel, regardless of the policies of the Israeli government—that makes him an enemy. But outside a handful of constituencies, the “Jewish vote” doesn’t matter very much in British politics. (Margaret Thatcher’s old seat of East Finchley was one of them; Ilford North, Wes Streeting’s constituency, is another.) Nor do most British voters—regardless of religion, party, or ideology—care about the precise wording used to disapprove of anti-Semitism.

The data—as opposed to the headlines—consistently show that virulent anti-Semitism is vanishingly rare in Britain, with only 2 percent of the population holding “very unfavorable” opinions about Jews, while 39 percent regard Jews favorably. Most Britons—56 percent—are either neutral or “don’t know.” The data also show anti-Semitism rising as you move to the right on the political spectrum.
While neither party can accurately be described as a hotbed of prejudice, Conservatives are somewhat more likely to “endorse antisemitic statements”—such as “Jews chase money more than other British people” or “I would be unhappy if a family member married a Jew”—than Labour supporters.

The real question, then, is why this dispute has spread so far and lasted so long, and whether anything can be done to resolve it. Because while the terms of the conflict can seem parochial, the stakes are enormous, and not just for Labour or British Jews. At the very least, the whole mess has been an enormously convenient—and dangerous—distraction from the ongoing catastrophe of Brexit, where the lack of an effective opposition has allowed Theresa May’s government to sleepwalk right to the cliff’s edge.

Whatever his personal faults, Corbyn has been the catalyst for a powerful challenge to the austerity agenda imposed by both Labour and Tory governments following the 2008 financial crisis. The economic program outlined by Corbyn’s shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, offers a radical break from both neoliberal orthodoxy, championed by the Tories and the Blairites alike, and the bureaucratic welfare-state model of the postwar European left, which until very recently remained the default Labour pole. If that left-populist alternative put forward by Corbyn runs aground on what, to most British voters, remains a peripheral issue, there is a very real danger that Britain will join Hungary, Poland, Italy, Austria, and the Czech Republic in the European axis of reaction.

So the focus is rightly on Corbyn, who now has a firm grip on his party’s machinery. Until the end of August, it was just about possible to believe that Corbyn’s perverse reluctance to act against anti-Semitism in the party—so long as it came cloaked in the colors of anti-Zionism—was political, a consequence of his unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause, or a refusal to give quarter to factional enemies.

However, once the Daily Mail released footage of Corbyn saying Zionists “don’t understand English irony,” that position became untenable. Yes, the Daily Mail is a vile paper—an enemy of progress by anyone’s reckoning. And as Corbyn later insisted, he may well have used the term “Zionist” in “the accurate political sense and not as a euphemism for Jewish people.” But the implication—that Jews, even if they’ve “lived in this country...all their lives,” aren’t, and can never be, fully British—is a classic trope, of the “socialism of fools” sometimes found among the conspiratorially minded left, but of the traditional racist prejudice once rife among the kind of people who were raised, as Corbyn was, in big country houses. Even for some of his longtime defenders, that was the last straw.

For Jews who supported Corbyn but never believed him infallible, the current situation is excruciating. Essentially, we are being told to shut up and take one for the team—a demand no political party claiming to be progressive has a right to make of any group. Desperate for some kind of resolution, in September I attended the Jewish Labour Movement’s conference, where I heard Momentum’s Lansman declare his “solidarity with Jewish female MPs” like Luciana Berger and Ruth Smeeth, who have been targets of vicious racist abuse online—as has Lansman himself.

Which made it all the more poignant to hear him repeat the argument he’d made to me months before: that the best way to deal with bigotry inside the party is through education and training, not expulsion. “Do you think there’s no redemption?” Lansman asked the conference. Summarizing just a few of the current government’s most egregious failures—on health, education, the environment, and the economy—he pleaded with the delegates not to let their understandable, and justifiable, anger over anti-Semitism lead them to abandon the fight. “Labour now has 600,000 members,” Lansman said. “Those 600,000 members are a weapon we can use to defeat the Tories. Do not throw it away lightly.”

Was anyone listening? The applause that followed Lansman’s remarks gave some cause for hope—at least until later that afternoon, when Margaret Hodge, a former minister in Tony Blair’s government who had confronted Corbyn in the House of Commons, calling him “an anti-Semite and a racist,” told the delegates that nothing short the Labour leader’s resignation would satisfy her. “The problem is that he is a problem,” Hodge said, to thunderous cheers.

Days later, Labour’s national executive committee announced that it had now adopted the full IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, including all the examples, along with a short statement declaring that “this will not in any way undermine freedom of expression on Israel or the rights of Palestinians.”

Will this be enough to end the conflict? Maybe not, given Hodge’s immediate dismissal of the move as “two steps forward and one step back.” But not all British Jews share her refusal to take yes for an answer—or her eagerness to fold the fight against anti-Semitism into a war on “the left.” Many of us realize that Jeremy Corbyn isn’t going to resign—and that the endless campaign to dislodge him is a distraction from the disasters facing this country.

With the next election less than four years away, and the very real possibility of a crash landing out of the European Union looming in March, only a fool would make predictions. The headlines here, however, seem to have moved on. For the moment, at least, it looks like British Jews and the Labour Party have each taken a step back from the brink.
The Body in Poverty

by SARAH SMARSH

The decline of America's rural health system and its toll on my family.
In Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth, Sarah Smarsh describes how Reagan-era policies pushed her family from working class to working poor, mapping their increasingly impoverished lives against the demise of the family farm, the defunding of public schools, and—as she explores in this adapted excerpt—the dismantling of public health care.

My childhood in Kansas happened to coincide with the moment that health-insurance and drug companies essentially merged with the nation’s for-profit hospital system, creating costs that were prohibitive for uninsured families like ours.

In our parts, health care was rare not just because of escalating costs but because of our remote location. We didn’t put much faith in doctor visits, anyway. We told ourselves that we didn’t need doctors, but the truth was that we couldn’t afford them. If you had a real health emergency, you were liable to be dead before some small town’s ambulance made it down the muddy, sandy ruts of our dirt roads. But a decade-old dropper of stinging red iodine would fix most cuts, so we went on like everything was fine.

By the time I was born, rural hospitals were closing and American health care had been transformed into a slick big business in the urban centers. Being the youngest of six, my dad was the only baby that Grandma Teresa gave birth to in a hospital rather than in the farmhouse where they were raised. But when I was a kid, the old ways of country doctors were still hanging on in places like ours—places that, I would later learn, much of the country thought endured only in movies and books.

As an infant, one night I came down with a dangerously high fever. My parents rushed me miles along bumpy roads to the rural home of Dr. Joseph Stech, a small-town physician who still sometimes made house calls. Dr. Stech had delivered me at a big Wichita hospital, but as I grew up he was still charging a modest fee for a visit at his 19th-century office on Main Street in nearby Andale. He gave me all my immunization shots and prescribed penicillin when I got strep throat. We didn’t have health insurance, but my parents could afford Dr. Stech’s fees. When I came down with chicken pox the day before the Christmas play at school, I cried next to our kitchen telephone while he told Mom over our shared rural party line that I had to stay home.

Once in a while, we’d drive past what to my eyes was a grand mansion on a hill, and my parents would say, “That’s where we took you when you were a baby and had a fever in the middle of the night.” No one remembered what Dr. Stech did to save me. For my family, the more important takeaway was that I just wasn’t meant to die that night.

“The good Lord will call you home when He’s ready,” Grandpa Arnie liked to say. “When it’s your time, it’s your time,” people repeated. The Lord wasn’t ready, and it wasn’t my time.

I would develop a habit of burning up, though. Until I was 2 or 3, Dad told me years later, severe fevers came and went. They didn’t rush me to Dr. Stech again or even to a Wichita hospital; the issue had ceased to seem an emergency, and every doctor visit costs money. Instead, they put me in a small tub of cold water.

“We’d splash a little water on you, and every time you were good to go!” Dad said.

I had lived, and that was all that mattered. The medical industry worked by naming ailments and prescribing Rural hospitals were closing, and American health care had been transformed into a slick big business in urban centers.

Sarah Smarsh is a Kansas-based journalist and essayist covering socioeconomic and class issues in the United States.
medicine, but the sort of healing we knew operated in mystery. We didn’t know the word “placebo” but figured that’s all survival ever was, until God called you home. Mind over matter.

But a few years down the road, people like us would face health epidemics that cried for professional care: obesity, diabetes, methamphetamine addiction, sepsis from what we called a “bad tooth” with infection at the root, abuse of opioids overprescribed by the same doctors who were supposed to help. When I was a young adult, I would see all those ailments inscribed on the bodies of my extended family: grooves and scabs on their faces, expanding waistlines, swollen feet, missing teeth, the erratic shakes of a body craving a Lortab fix. By then, the same forces of privatization that had all but shuttered state mental-health hospitals had compromised an entire system of general care to such an extent that even the middle class couldn’t afford treatment.

What was still preventable in the 1980s would, in a couple of decades, become manifest; what was once treatable would become deadly. I’m not sure my immediate family’s brushes with death when I was a kid—Mom’s hemorrhage in childbirth, Grandma Betty’s collapsed lung, Dad’s chemical poisoning—would be survived today. Mom would have been less healthy going into labor, Grandma would have been sent home too soon for lack of insurance, Dad would have been given a cheaper and less effective treatment. The mortality rate for poor rural women, in particular, has risen sharply over my lifetime.

Health insurance had been around for a long time, of course, but the power of that industry had swelled up fast, transforming access to care and all the costs that came with it. Grandma Betty would forget a lot about giving birth to Mom, but she always remembered how much she owed when she left the hospital: $12.

“That was hard to come up with then,” Betty told me. “I handed them the money and told her, ‘You’re all mine now.’”

That was at a military hospital in the 1960s. When I was in my 20s, it took me two years to pay off an emergency-room visit, and I had employer-based health insurance at the time.

It’s a hell of a thing to feel—to grow the food, serve the drinks, hammer the houses, and assemble the airplanes for people with more money to eat or drink or live in or fly around in, while you and the people you know can’t afford to go to the doctor. Even though no one complained or maybe even realized it was a problem, I could feel that the people around me knew they were viewed as dispensable.

While our family struggled to improve our situation with our intelligence, creativity, and grit, manual labor changed our bodies. Wrinkles and sunspots from years spent working in the fields beneath an unobstructed sun in the big Midwestern sky; limbs or fingers bruised, scarred, or lost altogether to big, churning equipment; back problems from standing on factory floors making motions as repetitive as the conveyor belt.

The physical markers of our place and class were so normal and constant, from my vantage, that I never thought to question them: the deep, black bruises everywhere beneath my dad’s fingernails; the smoker’s rattle in Grandma Betty’s lungs; the dentures she’d had since her late 20s; the painful sunburns I sometimes got on my young corneas working outside against a hard slant of light.

Occasionally, though, I detected something curious about my family’s bodies. Once, concerned, I rubbed a lump on Grandma Teresa’s nose. She explained it was where a doctor had cut off a bit of skin cancer, a bump on Grandma Teresa’s nose. She explained it was where a doctor had cut off a bit of skin cancer, a common ailment among farmers out in the sun all day. Grandpa Chic’s face, too, was a map of where the sun in the big Midwestern sky; limbs or fingers bruised, scarred, or lost altogether to big, churning equipment; back problems from standing on factory floors making motions as repetitive as the conveyor belt.

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Clothes didn’t hang from Grandpa Arnie but rather stretched across him. He was as tank-like as his tractors and combines. He was of average height but had the shoulders of a lineman, a bovine torso, and a round belly that threatened the snaps on the thin, brown plaid shirts he wore to threads. His hands were tremendous clamps of callouses and bruised fingernails and seemed too large even for his powerful arms. His hands handled rope with no gloves and swatted wasps on his shoulders. He wore sideburns on his wide jaw, and a fine patch of brown-gray hair swept across an otherwise bald head connected to a neck so thick Grandma Betty could never find collared dress shirts that fit around it. Most days he wore the top of his shirts undone to leave way for his neck, which I often studied.

It didn’t look like other necks. Not
like my mom’s, pale and smooth beneath long brown hair, or even my dad’s, darkened from work in the sun but still youthful. Grandpa Arnie’s neck was something else: serrated on the back, reddish-brown, with deep grooves like the rough sediment in creek embankments that revealed the geological strata of epochs. When he tilted his head back, his neck wrinkled into mounds of thick flesh.

I rubbed his shoulders when I was at their farmhouse and he came in from work to sit at the table with instant iced tea. Almost every evening, I dug my thumbs into his or Grandma Betty’s or my parents’ shoulders, which always seemed to be aching. Once, while kneading the knots in Arnie’s enormous back, I asked about his neck.

“Why does it look like that?”

“Like what?” Grandpa Arnie said.

“Like there are scars in it,” I said. Grandpa laughed and told me someone had accidentally hacked him on the back of the neck with an ax while chopping wood. I was so little that I didn’t realize he was joking. The real cause of the deep, jagged ruts, of course, was a lifetime on the Great Plains, pulling plows through fields in the hard sun and sand-filled wind or feeding cattle while stinging ice pellets rained down.

People today would call us “rednecks,” but I didn’t hear that word much growing up. When I did, I understood it as an insult—a city person calling a country person backward. Or, occasionally, a country person calling another country person trashy.

I had no idea about the word’s origins back then, and linguists still aren’t certain. It likely refers to a white field worker’s neck burned by the sun. In the early 1900s, striking coal miners took the term when they wore red bandannas around their necks in solidarity. And white-supremacist politicians in the South have used the word to pit poor whites against poor blacks.

Today, the term is leveraged to disparage an entire class and place. It is printed on baseball caps, even on baby bibs sold at Walmart, and worn by people with seeming pride.

As with other terms that have derogatory histories, reclaiming “redneck,” “trailer trash,” “hillbilly,” and so on is a sort of cultural self-defense, I guess. That is understandable enough. But if such a trend had existed when I was little, Mom wouldn’t have put me in a shirt with any of those words on it.

When I got to be a little bigger, there was a hit country song on the radio called “Trashy Women.” Once, riding with Mom in her car, I sang along with the lyrics: “I like my women just a little on the trashy side.” The male singer went on about how he was raised in a sophisticated, well-to-do household but was turned on by poor women, by waitresses in tight clothes and too much makeup. Mom winced and told me not to sing to that song. She changed the station.

We might have been born poor, and we might have been born female—two strikes against a body in the world. Mom might have looked like something that men wanted to possess, and I might have been an unwanted child—one more strike against each of us navigating an already perilous life. But Mom knew she wasn’t trash. And she knew her daughter wasn’t, either.

The US Supreme Court sits more than 12,000 miles from Tragadi Bandar, the patch of India’s west coast where Budha Ismail Jam has spent most of the past two decades fishing for a living. Jam’s seasonal home, a single room with burlap walls and no electricity or running water, is beyond the Court’s usual reach.

Yet, on October 31, Chief Justice John Roberts will announce Jam’s name as the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that could determine whether organizations like the World Bank Group’s International Finance Corporation (IFC) can be held responsible for harming the very people they’re supposed to be lifting from poverty.

Jam, who is about 60, belongs to the Wagher people, a Muslim-minority group in India that, for two centuries, has relied on the Gulf of Kutch for survival. Every summer, about 1,000 Wagher families migrate from their inland villages to a string of fishing grounds near the town of Mundra in Gujarat state. There, they erect temporary dwellings on the sand. The men harvest the fish, both from boats and on foot. The women dry the catch on long bamboo trellises, preparing it for sale across South Asia.

“We lived high-class,” Jam told me, reminiscing about the old days, when I visited Tragadi Bandar four years ago. “We worked from eight in the morning until 11 at night…. We did not mind if we didn’t get rest…. When we had fish, our whole day went by quickly.”

Then heavy industry began taking over the coastline. Among the behemoth newcomers was the coal-fired Tata Mundra Ultra Mega Power Project, which began opera-
charges from the plant’s cooling system have decimated fish stocks; that dredging has destroyed the mangroves that act as marine nurseries; that coal dust and fly ash have tainted the drying fish; and that their drinking water has been ruined by saltwater intrusion. “The joy has gone away,” said Jam, who catches a fraction of what he used to.

Tata Power, which did not respond to requests for an interview, has previously stated that it “tirelessly works” to minimize environmental impacts, and that the power plant “has not impacted any mangroves [or] biodiversity-rich creeks.”

The Waghers fear that, as the fish disappear, their own survival will be increasingly imperiled. “These people have poisoned the sea,” Jubedaben Manjaliya, a family matriarch, told me when I was working on an earlier article for the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The Waghers’ declining income, she said, meant begging fish merchants for loans to cover their expenses, driving the community into debt. “Otherwise,” she said, “we can’t feed our families.”

This wasn’t supposed to happen. The IFC says it holds its clients to rigorous environmental and social standards. But even before Tata Mundra opened, local fishworkers were feeling ignored. In 2011, their organization, Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan (Association for the Struggle for Fishworkers’ Rights), or MASS, lodged a complaint with the IFC’s independent ombudsman. That complaint, however, didn’t bring the relief they needed.

So they sued. In 2015, Jam and MASS became plaintiffs—along with two other fishworkers, a village government, and a farmer who says his crops have been harmed—in a lawsuit against the IFC. The complaint was prepared by the nonprofit EarthRights International and filed in US District Court for the District of Columbia, where the IFC is headquartered. The complaint noted that the IFC’s mission includes investing money “with the intent to ‘do no harm’ to people and the environment,” and that it is obligated to monitor the projects it finances. “The Tata Mundra Plant is thus a mission failure.”

The IFC, in its response, didn’t dispute the facts; it simply asked the court to throw out the case, saying it enjoyed “absolute immunity” from lawsuits.

The court agreed with the IFC and dismissed the case in 2016. The following year, a three-member panel of the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit upheld the lower court’s decision. The appellate judges acknowledged that the lawsuit “paints a dismal picture” of life on the Mundra coast and that “the IFC did not take any steps” to compel its client to protect local communities. But from a legal perspective, the appellate court ruled, Jam and his neighbors were “swimming upriver”: The DC Circuit had a “long-held precedent” that, under a 1945 law, international organizations can’t be sued.

That’s the question before the Supreme Court in October: whether an ambiguous World War II–era statute really intended to give organizations like the IFC and the World Bank a blanket protection from lawsuits.

Human-rights advocates are watching the case carefully. The World Bank Group has been linked for decades to humanitarian and environmental disasters. According to a 2015 report by the International Consortium of In-
vestigative Journalists, over the previous decade World Bank–funded projects had physically or economically displaced 3.4 million people. Between 2009 and 2013, the consortium noted, World Bank Group lenders invested $50 billion in projects that had been “grazed the highest risk for ‘irreversible or unprecedented’ social or environmental impacts.”

A ruling in favor of the Indian fishworkers could help other victims seek justice. In fact, there’s another set of plaintiffs—Honduran farmers or their widows—awaiting the Supreme Court’s decision in

**T**he 1945 law is called the International Organizations Immunities Act. It applies to “public” organizations like the World Bank and the IFC, which are composed of member countries, including the United States. Those groups, it says, “shall enjoy the same immunity from suit and every form of judicial process as is enjoyed by foreign governments.”

That last phrase is the tricky one: “enjoyed by foreign governments” when—in 1945? Or in 2018? “It’s actually about what the word ‘is’ is,” says Harold Hongju Koh, a professor of international law at Yale Law School and a former legal adviser to the State Department.

To understand why this matters, it helps to know that before World War II, international organizations were rare. One exception was the League of Nations, to which the United States didn’t belong. Then, in 1944, delegates from 44 countries gathered in New Hampshire for the Bretton Woods conference, which created the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (now part of the World Bank). The United Nations was launched around the same time. “The idea among the great powers was, ‘We’re going to cooperate on an international level—economically, military, politically,’” says William Dodge, a law professor at the University of California, Davis.

The United States had no law governing these new organizations, and it needed one quickly. “I could imagine the State Department saying, ‘What do we do?’” Dodge continues. “What they proposed was, ‘We need a default rule’...and that was going to be ‘whatever [foreign] states are entitled to.’”

At the time, the United States generally (but not always) granted absolute immunity from lawsuits to the governments of foreign states. This policy, however, was evolving to match the rules of other countries, from Egypt to France to Peru. In 1952, the State Department issued a new edict: It would still grant immunity, but not for a foreign government’s commercial transactions. That exception was codified in a 1976 law called the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act.

The IFC claims that Congress meant to give organizations like itself permanent absolute immunity—without a commercial exception that might exclude the Tata Mundra loan—because that was how the United States treated foreign governments 73 years ago. In other words, the IFC’s immunity should be frozen at 1940s levels.

Many legal scholars—including Koh and Dodge, who signed a brief supporting the plaintiffs—call this view preposterous. Congress, they say, never intended for international organizations to have more protection than foreign governments. “It’s a huge metaphysical question about whether the law is static or whether it evolves,” says Koh. “Obviously, it evolves.... The term ‘due process’ doesn’t mean what ‘due process’ meant when we were cutting off people’s hands.”

The IFC declined interview requests for this story. In court filings, it has argued that lifting absolute immunity “would potentially open a floodgate of lawsuits” from around the world. The fear of litigation, with its “devastating costs,” would hinder the IFC from doing its job, the organization claimed.

Dodge doesn’t buy the argument. “ExxonMobil has no immunity from suit,” he says. “And the floodgates haven’t opened against them. They might prefer to be sued less, but being subject to suit doesn’t keep them from running a very profitable business.”

On this issue, two US Circuit Courts have reached opposite conclusions. Twenty years ago, the DC Circuit ruled that Congress intended to freeze immunity at 1945 levels. (One judge in Jam v. IFC, Cornelia Pillard, called that decision “a wrong turn,” but said she was bound by precedent.) Then, in 2010, the Philadelphia-based Third Circuit concluded that the law was meant to evolve. With the circuits split, it’s up to the Supreme Court to break the tie.

The IFC maintains that communities like the Waghers, even without access to US courts, have an “alternative means of recourse”: the World Bank Group’s Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman, which deputy counsel Fady Zeidan calls a “flexible, settlement-oriented” mechanism. The CAO reports directly to the World Bank Group’s president and can both mediate disputes and investigate complaints. But it has no enforcement powers.

“CAO, at best, can say, ‘Yes, this is violated.’ So what?” says Joe Athialy, the executive director of the Centre for Financial Accountability, a New Delhi–based NGO that works closely with MASS. “If you don’t have the power to say what needs to be done as a course correction, then what’s the purpose?”

Still, to the Indian fishworkers, the CAO represented the best option in 2011, when they felt shut out of the planning process for the Tata Mundra plant. In an 18-page complaint, they asked the ombudsman to investigate what they called the plant’s “flawed development.”
The CAO’s findings, issued in 2013, were extensive and damning. The fishing families, “who represent a vulnerable group given their migrant traditions and status as a religious minority, were not adequately considered as the…risks and impacts of the project were considered,” the report said. Tata Power’s subsidiary failed to consult properly with the fishworkers on Tragadi Bandar and another seasonal settlement. There were “no baseline data” collected about the fishing communities. The IFC, which was supposed to monitor its client, “paid insufficient attention” to these shortcomings.

The CAO’s report also called the power plant’s environmental assessment inadequate. It chastised the IFC for failing to ensure that the plant wouldn’t discharge overheated wastewater back into the Gulf of Kutch.

“The CAO report reconfirmed all the concerns that the people raised,” Athialy says. “This was an opportunity for the [IFC] to show to the world that they mean business when it comes to compliance.”

Rather than admitting fault, the IFC disputed many of the CAO’s findings. “IFC does recognize that there have been some impacts on the fishing community,” it said, but added that Tata’s local subsidiary has “correctly addressed” the problems. Since then, according to a 2017 CAO monitoring report, the IFC has taken some corrective steps, including a socioeconomic study of the fishing grounds and the testing of ash residue for radioactivity and heavy metals. But those steps, the CAO continued, “are not sufficient”; fixing the ombudsman’s problems would require a “rapid, participatory and expressly remedial approach.”

Athialy says the IFC’s dilatory response “comes from the arrogance of immunity.” Knowing that it can’t be sued, the IFC has no incentive to hurry.

Advocates for vulnerable communities say the Waghers’ experience with the CAO is hardly unique. In Peru, for example, repeated oil spills linked to Maple Energy, another IFC client, contaminated the waterways used by indigenous people in two Amazon communities, according to a 2010 CAO complaint. The ombudsman tried to broker a dialogue between residents and Maple Energy. When that broke down, the CAO declined to do a full audit, asserting that it would “yield limited information.” Instead, the CAO closed the case.

These stories illustrating the CAO’s limits come from around the world, advocates and researchers say: from Kazakhstan, for example, where children living near an IFC-financed oil-and-gas field reportedly suffered from seizures and convulsions; and from Central America, where the IFC continued to invest in sugar companies even as Nicaraguan workers were dying of chronic kidney disease.

Immunity was never supposed to protect the IFC from Kazakh schoolchildren, indigenous Peruvians, or Indian fishworkers, but rather from lawsuits by governments, says Daniel Bradlow, a professor of international law at South Africa’s University of Pretoria who has consulted for the World Bank. Over time, Bradlow wrote in a brief for the Jam plaintiffs, the IFC’s claim of immunity “has evolved from a shield that protects the IFC from interference by its member states into a sword.”

When I reached Jam by phone in early September, he told me that the conditions on Tragadi Bandar had deteriorated since my 2014 visit. “The catch has gone down drastically,” he said. He still felt optimistic, though, that the fish would return if the US courts ordered pollution reductions at the Tata Mundra plant.

That’s one of the demands by the Indian plaintiffs: that the IFC use its leverage to make sure that the power plant operates more cleanly and that the existing damage is remediated. Jam and his neighbors have also asked for a medical monitoring system to detect environmental illnesses and financial compensation for their lost livelihoods.

Even if they prevail at the Supreme Court, however, that decision will only address their right to sue. The lawsuit will then have to be litigated on its merits. But a favorable ruling for Jam on the immunity question could make the IFC more vigilant about protecting impoverished communities affected by its financial decisions. And it could give those communities another recourse.

EarthRights International, which filed the Jam case, is waiting to try a second federal case against the IFC. It involves the Honduran palm-oil producer Dinant, an IFC client that critics have linked to the intimidation, beatings, and killings of farmers in a land dispute. (Dinant has denied responsibility for the violence.) A CAO investigation into the case found that IFC staffers were encouraged not to delve too deeply into land conflicts, “lest you open a Pandora’s Box.”

“The IFC was literally funding murder,” EarthRights attorney Richard Herz says of the Honduras case. In its response to the lawsuit, the IFC again claimed immunity. The case, filed in 2017, is on hold pending the Supreme Court’s Jam ruling.

Athialy considers the case so important that he’s thinking of flying from India to listen to the arguments. “If the financiers are not held accountable, if the affected communities are not ensured of justice, we are bound to see…”
Lessons From and for AOC

Thank you for an excellent cover story, “The AOC Effect,” about the Democratic Party’s new rock star, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [Sept. 10/17]. Although I am pleased that Ocasio-Cortez is campaigning for other progressive candidates, she needs to remember one thing: The guy she beat, Congressman Joe Crowley, also received national attention and was a front-runner for Speaker of the House. He neglected his district while soaking up praise from Democrats across the country. It’s more fun traveling the country and getting applause from people all over the United States than helping a senior citizen with a problem or fighting to get funds to renovate a low-income housing complex. But to win reelection, our future congressperson must remember that all politics is local. She needs to spend most of her time addressing the needs of her district and constituents. She needs to prove that her brand of politics will improve the quality of life for the people she will be elected to represent.

Paul Feiner
Team Supervisor
Greenburgh, N.Y.

Buried deep within John Nichols’s article on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are some simple winning ideas that Democrats need to repeat often and in unison across the country. Had they done this in the past four election cycles, especially in 2016, they would have won the presidency and the Senate, if not the House.

1. Democrats will place the needs of working people ahead of the wealthy and big business. 2. Republicans, not Democrats, will be the party of the private sector. 3. Democrats will fight for affordable health care, affordable college and trades training, affordable housing, renewable-energy programs, and meaningful jobs programs in the hardest-hit and largely ignored areas of the country. 4. Democrats will fight to protect our environment and natural resources, rebuild our infrastructure, and ensure meaningful retirement protections for everyone.

Unfortunately, Nichols repeated a dangerous and unnecessary term in his article. These are not democratic-socialist ideas. They are common sense, because they are programs that will truly help working families and the middle class. The Republican Party proved decades ago that they have no interest in these folks. Democrats do.

Frank Friedman
Delanco, N.J.

A National Nadir

Thanks to Katha Pollitt for her wonderfully written column, “When They Go Low” [July 30/Aug. 6], which describes, among other things, the GOP’s hypocritical snuggling with the fanatical Christian right. Not only do they want to sweep women and people of color back a century, but the America they really want is a bleak return to the religious zealotry of the Pilgrims. No wonder “witch hunting” has become so prominent in our national discussion.

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Letters
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Kudos, the final book in Rachel Cusk’s Outline trilogy, ends with a confrontation between a man and a woman on a beach. Both are naked. The woman is swimming; the man, “resplendent and grinning,” is peeing in the water just behind her.

Cusk’s writing in this scene approaches the mythic: The man’s urine is “like a gold rope he was casting into the sea”; the sea itself, she adds, is like “some sighing creature.” We are in an Eden beset by evil, a world in which women and men are locked in an old, inescapable conflict.

It’s an evocative scene, not least because, in a novel filled with people’s voices, it takes place in total silence.

But the scene is significant for another reason. It illustrates a central theme in Kudos and the trilogy’s other novels, Outline (2014) and Transit (2016): How free can a woman ever be? Perhaps there will always be a man lurking in the background, muddying the waters of what would otherwise be a place of total freedom.

The question of female freedom, its variations and limitations, is one

Maggie Doherty is a lecturer at Harvard. The Equivalents, her first book, will be published by Knopf.
that has preoccupied Cusk throughout her career. From her earliest work, about the travails of being a hyperintelligent young woman in a world filled with difficult men, to her more recent work, on the uniquely female crises of midlife, Cusk has attempted to answer this question. She has explored it in conventional realist fiction, in her memoirs of motherhood and marriage, and again in the inventive Outline trilogy. Indeed, the series’ experimental form can obscure this thematic continuity. While these recent novels are far less conventional than Cusk’s early fiction—the three Outline books consist almost entirely of conversation, with little description of setting and even less of the narrator’s inner life—Cusk’s long-standing preoccupations are all present nonetheless. Like the work that preceded it, the trilogy is also about the strictures of femininity, the claustrophobia of domestic life, and the illusions fashion in order to survive both.

The Outline series represents Cusk’s most rigorous and impressive attempt to date to write about the problem of female freedom. The women of Kudos grapple with the legacy of second-wave feminism and wonder why, if we’re closer to gender equality than ever, they still feel so trapped and miserable. Some characters make a radical break with bourgeois domesticity; others find ways to live within its confines. What they all share, however, is a commitment to speaking honestly about the compromises and sacrifices that mark many women’s lives. Cusk’s female characters, like the author herself, reckon with their imprisonment, rather than deluding themselves into thinking that they were always already free.

At 51, Cusk has had a prolific career. The author of 10 novels and three memoirs, she was listed as one of Granta’s Best Young British Novelists in 2003 and is the winner of several literary prizes, including the Whitbread First Novel Award for Saving Agnes, published when she was 26. Though born in Canada, Cusk has lived in the United Kingdom since she was 8, and throughout her career she has focused on the perils and possibilities of English domestic life. She is most interested in bourgeois domesticity; her characters tend to be artists, writers, teachers, intellectuals, and professionals of various stripes. The handful of poor or working-class characters who appear in her books are often rendered unsympathetically and without much psychological depth. This can be frustrating, given that her middle-class characters often opine on their experiences in ways that draw universal lessons from their privileged status.

Cusk’s explorations of bourgeois domestic life have come in a range of genres—satire, conventional realist fiction, memoir—and her approach to the topic has changed as she’s matured. Composed and published in the mid-1990s, her first two novels, Saving Agnes and The Temporary, examined the ordeals of young-female adulthood (boring office jobs, desultory love affairs) with a combination of irony and seriousness. In these years, she also wrote a comic novel, The Country Life, which drew on Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. After giving birth to her first child, Cusk turned her attention to marriage and motherhood. Her style in these midcareer novels resembles that of her earlier work: She employs the same ironic tone, long sentences, precise and elevated diction, and a preference for internal monologue. There is so little dialogue in some of these early and midcareer novels that it can come as a shock when a character speaks aloud.

Her middle novels—all written in the first decade of the 2000s—were also remarkably fatalistic about women’s efforts to revolutionize the family and liberate themselves. The Lucky Ones begins with a woman in labor who is also unfairly imprisoned; the opening section is appropriately called “Confinement.” Arlington Park, her 2006 satire about a group of unhappy women living in provincial England, equates suburban motherhood with self-annihilation. “Actually, I’m dead. I was murdered a few years ago,” one mother explains. The Bradshaw Variations imagines a couple who swap gender roles. Tonie works full-time in a university English department in London, while Thomas, her husband, stays home and looks after their daughter. On the train into work, Tonie embraces her “masculinity,” hoping to achieve a “synthesis” between her male and female identities—but after their daughter is struck by a devastating illness, Thomas returns to work, and Tonie once again becomes the primary caregiver.

A similar disquieting theme can be found in Cusk’s memoirs. In her 2001 A Life’s Work, she describes the surprising, irreconcilable conflicts she experienced during the first year of her eldest daughter’s life. “I did not understand what a challenge to the concept of sexual equality the experience of pregnancy and childbirth is. Birth is not merely that which divides women from men: it also divides women from themselves.” In Aftermath, her 2012 memoir about divorce, Cusk offered a different take on the significance of gender roles. Like the fictional Bradshaws, Cusk and her ex-husband had experimented with inverting the bourgeois household: She wrote full-time, while he cared for the children. This reversal, Cusk later came to worry, may have been what doomed their marriage. Precisely because men are not charged with being homemakers and caregivers, they can be enthusiastic about these activities without feeling compromised by them—if anything, they can congratulate themselves for acting in a politically enlightened fashion. Conversely, when Cusk took on those activities, she felt “most unsexed” and least like herself. Traditional gender roles reappeared in the wake of her marriage’s collapse. When Cusk and her husband divorced, she claimed that the children belonged to her; after all, she was their mother. Her husband wondered bitterly how she could think this and still call herself a feminist.

Despite similarities in style and substance, Cusk’s fiction has won prizes and critical praise, while her memoirs have proved controversial. Some called A Life’s Work “pure misery to read”; others noted that Aftermath was “maddening” for being elliptical and allusive rather than forthright and personal. (In the latter, Cusk writes more about the Oresteia than about her

Outline
By Rachel Cusk
Picador. 256 pp. $17

Transit
By Rachel Cusk
Picador. 272 pp. $17

Kudos
By Rachel Cusk
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 240 pp. $26
Because of Colombia’s tragic past, I signed up for this trip with some trepidation. I am so thankful that I did. Our group was expertly guided as we engaged with the beauty of this country, its history, art, and culture, its diverse people and ecosystems, and, most importantly, with local leaders who are guiding the movement for peace and justice.

— Josh S., Colorado

The trip was a remarkable introduction to a fascinating and astonishingly beautiful country. Flawlessly organized from start to finish, it took me to places I would not have visited on my own, in the company of well-informed, energetic, and interesting people—guides, lecturers, and fellow travelers alike.

— Judith K., New Hampshire

After looking at our Nation itinerary in Colombia, our friend in Bogotá smiled and said, ‘Oh, good. You’re going to see the real Colombia.’ He was so right. Insightful speakers, numerous off-the-grid experiences, opportunities to meet Colombians from many strata of the country’s complex population, and tremendous ambition in constructing the itinerary adds up to a lot of meaning and fun.

— Marilyn S., Ohio

Colombia has changed. Visitors today extol the innovative and alluring cities of Bogotá and Medellín, the postcard-perfect countryside, amazing ancient ruins, charming new hotels, provocative modern art, and trendy restaurants featuring local meats and produce. Inspiring activists are working on memory and reconciliation issues and fighting for the fair implementation of the historic peace deal. It’s an important time to visit, and to support the aspirations of Colombians working toward a more peaceful future.

For more information and to see the full itinerary, go to TheNation.com/COLOMBIA or contact us at travels@thenation.com or 212-209-5401.
marriage.) “On and on it went,” she later observed of her memoirs’ reception. “I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual.”

One might think this critical reception would have led her away from autobiography and back to fiction. But Cusk had come to view fiction as “fake and embarrassing,” and autobiography as “increasingly the only form in all the arts.” However, she had also learned her lesson: “I could not do [autobiography] without being misunderstood and making people angry,” Cusk told a reporter in 2014. With the Outline trilogy, then, Cusk creates a hybrid form, one part autobiography and one part novel, in which the writer speaks little and listens to others instead. In these novels, Cusk does away with many fictional conventions that might seem “fake”—exposition, characterization, rising and falling action—and replaces them with conversation. The stories told to Faye—the narrator and Cusk’s alter ego—are often more like sketches, remarkable not for their narrative drama or descriptive detail but for the emotional insights they communicate. The other characters speak to Faye intimately and eloquently. They use elaborate metaphors to describe their failing marriages; they speak solemnly about mortality and fate. Faye is usually silent and reveals little about her own life. We know that she’s a writer, recently divorced in Outline and recently remarried in Kudos, but what we know about Faye’s values and beliefs comes primarily through the questions she asks of her conversational partners.

This is a canny form of auto-fiction, one that occludes the authorial self rather than exposing it. Unlike other contemporary practitioners—Ben Lerner, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Sheila Heti—who draw their material from their own lives, Cusk is largely drawing from the lives of others. She breaks as well with a longer tradition of female confessional writing that extends from Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath to Elizabeth Wurtzel and Leslie Jamison, a tradition that is sometimes described as “empowering.” Cusk, in contrast, derives her power from her refusal to expose herself while revealing, with precision and control, the intimate lives of others. As a narrator, Faye’s main function is to compile the stories that give shape to domestic life. Some of these stories she quotes verbatim; others she presents as reported speech; still others are swiftly and perhaps a little cruelly summarized, such as the one from the billionaire who appears briefly at the very beginning of the trilogy and is “keen to give me the outline of his life story, which had begun unpropersingly and ended—obviously—with him being the relaxed, well-heeled man who sat across the table from me today.”

There are other, less obvious and more complicated (though not necessarily truthful) stories. In Outline, Faye, who is visiting Athens for two weeks to teach a writing course, listens to a Greek businessman, thrice-married and thrice-divorced, who relates to her the saga of his second marriage. She listens to a fellow writing instructor, Ryan, tell her about the equanimous and transactional nature of his marriage, then watches as he greedily ogles every young woman in Athens. She meets her Greek friend Paniotis, an editor, and listens to him discuss the demise of his marriage, especially how the pressure to accumulate infected his household; he then wistfully recalls the perfection of his childhood.

In Outline, male voices predominate; it’s as though Faye has gathered a group of men to fill the space that her ex-husband used to occupy. In Transit, set in London, the voices of Faye and other women emerge more fully. The title refers to Faye’s transition from her earlier conjoined life to a new, solitary existence. (The word first occurs in an e-mail from an astrologer, in reference to a shift in the alignment of the stars.) Faye decides to renovate her newly purchased flat; the renovation, and the feud it sparks with her neighbors downstairs, provides the novel with its major narrative conflict. Faye is more talkative and less passive in this book. There are still characteristic moments of self-effacement—participating in a literary panel, Faye reports extensively on the speeches by her fellow panelists, all of whom are men, but refuses to disclose what she herself says—but, on the whole, she is less of a cipher than she was in Outline. She makes decisions about flooring; she gives private writing lessons to a student; she goes on dates.

Faye also offers some revealing statements about herself, after having been mostly laconic in Outline. “My current feelings of powerlessness had changed the way I looked at what happens and why,” she tells a dinner date, “to the extent that I was beginning to see what other people called fate in the unfolding of events, as though living were merely an act of reading to find out what happens next.” Faye no longer believes in fate, which Cusk, in an interview, has called a particularly female form of self-deception (she thinks women too often substitute a belief in “destiny” for a reckoning with their own powerlessness). She now understands it as an effect wrought upon the vulnerable by those in power, a “reverberation of their will.” In renovating her flat, in deciding “to create a disturbance,” Faye attempts, from her place within an existing structure, to work her will upon the world.

In Kudos, Faye again retreats into the background. Here she’s replaced by a slew of women, each of whom is navigating the challenges of midlife. Like her, many of these women are divorced and have children. They work in the publishing industry as writers, editors, journalists, or translators. They are contemptuous of men, if not afraid of them. And they are preoccupied with the twin problems of freedom and power: how to attain them, or how to live without one or both.

Kudos takes place in a small German town during a literary conference. Shortly after Faye arrives at the conference hotel, she meets Linda, a “tall, soft, thick-limbed woman” with matted hair and pasty skin. (As an observer, Faye—like Cusk—is unforgiving.) Linda has just spent two weeks on a writing retreat, trapped in a castle like a fairy-tale princess. While there, she wrote a story about a family’s pet hamster. In this story, a mother, feeling neglected and driven mad by the sound of the hamster on its wheel, eventually lets the creature out of its cage and shoos it from the apartment. She cruelly allows her daughter to draw her own, self-punishing conclusions for the pet’s “liberation.”

The episode is typical of the trilogy: It’s a series of stories nested within each other like Russian dolls, each taking up the theme
of captivity. (Linda and Faye are being held hostage in a different sense—at the behest of their publisher, they’re about to engage in the farce that is a festival panel discussion.) Releasing the hamster doesn’t free the unhappy mother any more than Linda is freed by a writing residency abroad, where she only finds new ways to feel trapped and unhappy. Linda compares herself to a pet dog: “It’s never going to be free, if it even remembers what freedom is.”

These layered stories—rich and evocative and, at times, quite moving—are all retold at a hotel bar where, several yards away, a wedding party populated exclusively by happy young people has gathered. Faye notices the scene immediately upon entry, along with the “expression of self-consciousness, almost of culpability,” worn by the bride and groom. Linda, for her part, wonders whether they’re watching a film being made.

This sense of watching happy lives from afar is a recurring motif in the Outline trilogy. The observation of the wedding party recalls an episode in Outline when Faye and the Greek businessman, having taken out his boat, gaze across the cove at a family with many children, swimming and playing alongside their own boat. Faye knows that this image of domestic tranquility is just that—an image, and one with a tenuous relationship to the truth—but all the same she longs to immerse herself in it once again.

While Linda and Faye may still envy the domestic lives they observe, other women in Kudos have put the images of family life far behind them. Near the end of the novel, Faye lunches with Paola, her editor, and Felícia, who has translated some of Faye’s books. Divorced from an angry man whom she refers to as “The Buccaneer,” Paola is a strong, wiry woman with an appetite for walking and a sense of humor regarding her past domestic abuse. At 50, she favors loose tunics because her “body is asking for privacy…. It has finally cast out my lifelong belief in romantic love.” Meanwhile, Stefano, Felícia’s ex-husband, is turning their daughter against her and has reclaimed the family’s only car. Felícia’s mother blames her for the difficulties of the divorce. “Look at what all your equality has done for you,” she remonstrates; if only Felícia had committed herself to motherhood and stopped working entirely, she would have been able to win a better settlement. Despite her mother’s opprobrium and her husband’s cruelty, Felícia remains steadfast in her independence and gets by on her small teaching salary.

Faye takes in these stories without comment. Paola and Felícia have chosen to live as self-described “outlaws,” forsaking bourgeois domesticity entirely. Faye, however, has returned to it with her new marriage. She is no fool—she knows the often difficult and dangerous reality of married life—but she thinks it’s better to try to survive marriage than to transcend it. As she explains to her companions, “I hoped to get the better of those laws…by living within them.” She believes that she can renovate from the inside out.

In some sense, Cusk has done the same with the Outline novels. Critics have praised the way the trilogy upends the rules of fiction, and they’re mostly right: Although Cusk’s material here is the same as in her earlier novels, she has reworked it so that it’s almost unrecognizable in its new form. The formal strategies she’s devised—outlining and erasing, compiling and undercutting—allow her to write honestly and precisely about the many sacrifices that women and men make in order to abide by the rules of domestic life. Unlike her memoirs, which at times can feel overwrought, Cusk finds a way here to be serious without being self-serious. While the novels are about the impossibility of achieving freedom or liberation, they are also evidence that an experienced artist can dispense with old habits and conventions to experiment with new styles and forms. Cusk finds a freedom in art that she cannot locate in life.

Why would a newly liberated writer return to old themes? For Cusk, it’s the duty of the female artist to document the challenges of domestic life, to write honestly about the many ways that women struggle and fail to be free. She makes this point most clearly in an interview near the end of Kudos, which is conducted by a beautiful television host who hopes to talk to Faye about “the problem of recognition for female writers and artists.” While they wait for the camera crew to set up, the interviewer launches into a long, rambling dissertation on the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, whose work, she insists, is about femaleness and invisibility. The interviewer praises Bourgeois’s sketches from the 1940s, in which the artist, then the mother of small children, represents herself as a spider and motherhood as an inescapable web. Faye reports the interviewer’s evaluation of this work:

It is understandable, she said, that a woman of talent might resent being fated to the feminine subject and might seek freedom by engaging with the world on other terms; yet the image of Bourgeois’s spider, she said, seems almost to reproach the woman who has run away from these themes and left the rest of us stuck, as it were, in our webs.

For the interviewer, and it seems for Cusk as well, solidarity requires the female artist to take up “the feminine subject” rather than sidestepping it. By writing from within the bourgeois domestic world, describing its compromises and complexities, Cusk has created for herself not power or freedom, exactly, but what she once called (in reference to another woman writer) “female authority.”

If, at times, this fiction feels claustrophobic, with its fixed gender roles and its preclusion of alternative ways of living and loving, it is also compelling in subtle and surprising ways. Cusk has produced a portrait of domestic life that will resonate for some and feel entirely foreign for others—those to whom freedom comes more easily. But even women who have freed themselves from the web may still wonder about some of the questions these books raise: about the limits of self-perception, and about the continual challenge of living peacefully with those you love.

At the end of Kudos, as she tries to explain her new marriage, Faye refers to a painting that her son once made, a copy of Salome With the Head of Saint John the Baptist by Artemisia Gentileschi, an artist who specialized in portraits of female vengeance. But her son—his mother’s child—has left out all the details, so that only the outline remains. “[W]ithout those details,” Faye recalls, “and the story to which they were associated, the painting became a study not of murderousness but of the complexity of love.”
PENTAGON CURBS MEDIA ACCESS. So ran the headline over a July Politico report about the “increasingly adversarial relationship” between the Defense Department and the reporters assigned to cover it. Since Donald Trump took office, journalists have complained about the infrequency of briefings, the inaccessibility of officials, the president’s refusal to call on reporters who displease him; even the threat to move the White House press room from its traditional place in the West Wing has occasioned loud protests. While the ferocity of Trump’s attacks on the media seems unprecedented (at least since Richard Nixon), the media’s demand for access is not; in fact, it’s a perennial feature of American journalism. So too are the associated risks, for, in seeking that access, journalists often have to make various compromises and accommodations.

The benefits and perils of access are a central theme of Seymour Hersh’s new memoir, Reporter. Over the past half-century, Hersh has been one of America’s premier investigative journalists. But unlike, say, Bob Woodward, who specializes in getting those in power to talk, Hersh has been an untethered operator whose scoops have resulted from veering from the pack. In describing how it’s done, Reporter offers a best-practices guide to journalism as well as an implicit critique of the way it’s practiced today. The book also captures Hersh’s own ambiguous relationship to access and his sometimes questionable use of anonymous sources. No less important, Reporter exposes a structural weakness in American journalism—one that, while linked to the culture of access, extends far beyond it.

Hersh first encountered this weakness while working at the City News Bureau in Chicago. He got there through an unlikely route. Born in 1937 to lower-middle-class Jewish immigrants, Hersh didn’t know anyone in the newspaper business; his father ran a dry-cleaning store in a largely black neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. As Hersh writes, learning to fit in at that neighborhood would make it possible for him to mix easily later in life with a wide variety of people, including scientists, generals, legislators, and intelligence officers.

*Breaking News*  
Seymour Hersh and the ambiguities of investigative reporting

**by MICHAEL MASSING**

*Reporter  
A Memoir*  
By Seymour Hersh  
Knopf. 368 pp. $27.95
After attending a two-year junior college, he transferred to the University of Chicago, where his ability to write helped him get his degree and eventually earned him a position at City News, which covered the courts and police for Chicago’s newspapers. According to Hersh, the mob ran the city, the cops were on the take, and reporters mostly ignored the corruption in return for access to crime scenes and the right to park wherever they wished.

One night, when Hersh was on duty at police headquarters, he overheard two cops in the parking lot discussing a robbery suspect who’d been shot dead. “So the guy tried to run on you?” one of the cops asked. “Naw,” said the other, “I told the nigger to beat it and then plugged him.” Leaving the scene undetected, Hersh called an editor at City News and told him what he’d heard. The editor urged him to ignore it; it would be his word against theirs, and the cops would accuse him of lying. Hersh decided to wait a few days and ask for the coroner’s report; it showed that the man had been shot in the back. With a feeling of unease, Hersh let the story drop. It was, he recalls in Reporter, a shameful example of a practice he would witness time and again throughout his career: self-censorship.

In discussions of the American press, self-censorship is rarely mentioned. Thanks to the First Amendment, journalists in the United States enjoy some of the greatest freedoms and strongest legal protections in the world, but they often fail to make full use of them. In Reporter, Hersh offers some telling examples, including one that occurred while he was working for the Associated Press, which he joined after a stint in the Army and some time spent at newspapers in suburban Chicago. Hersh provides an exhilarating description of his early wire-service years, in which he covered everything from racial strife to birth control. After being transferred to the AP’s Washington desk, he was eventually assigned to the Pentagon, which finally gave him an opportunity to report on the expanding US presence in Vietnam.

Most journalists assigned to the Pentagon beat had been on it for a decade or more and valued access above all else. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara would hold cozy off-the-record sessions with reporters, who dutifully relayed the official point of view in their stories. The Pentagon press room, Hersh wrote, had all “the earmarks of a high-end social club.” Hersh refused to join it. His initial major breakthrough came after he read a series in Science magazine about the Pentagon’s research on chemical and biological warfare (CBW) and decided to probe deeper. Hersh knew that most military bases had weekly newspapers, and in the Pentagon library he looked up the papers for bases with known CBW facilities. These papers carried articles about retirement parties held for colonels and generals, and Hersh compiled a list of names and addresses. He then spent two months on the road, interviewing these retirees in small towns and stopping by the local papers to learn about the research facilities in the area. The Pentagon claimed that the research was being undertaken to defend against a possible attack by the Soviet Union, but the weapons under development seemed to have a destructive capacity far beyond that. Hersh prepared a five-part series totaling more than 15,000 words and gave it to the head of the AP’s investigative unit. Two weeks passed, with no response. Finally, the series was shrunk down (without his consultation) to a single story of slightly more than 1,000 words and sent out over the AP wire just after midnight on a Sunday morning—“the darkest of dark holes for wire service journalism.”

But Hersh refused to let the story die. In a long piece prepared for The New Republic (dramatically titled “Just a Drop Can Kill”), he listed 52 universities and campus research centers that were doing work on CBW under military contract. Student protests erupted after the piece appeared. With much of the mainstream media continuing to ignore the matter, however, Hersh decided to leave the AP and write a book about his findings.

After completing the book, he was offered a job as press secretary for Eugene McCarthy. An outspoken critic of the war, McCarthy in 1967 had decided to challenge Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. Hersh admired McCarthy’s willingness to confront the president over Vietnam, and, as he noted, “anything in public life was better than being yet another freelance journalist.”

The McCarthy campaign proved to be both chaotic and exasperating. In the New Hampshire primary, McCarthy shocked the nation by winning 42 percent of the vote (versus Johnson’s 49 percent), but he was a cerebral and reluctant candidate. The poet Robert Lowell frequently joined McCarthy and Hersh on the campaign trail, and as the three sipped chilled vodka from a thermos, Hersh would frantically try to prepare McCarthy for the next event. The senator’s wife, Abigail, was given to venomous comments and paranoid flights, and she once complained about all the “Hebrews” working for her husband. McCarthy had his own blind spots, especially on matters of race. After the senator canceled a series of events in black Milwaukee neighborhoods in the belief that it would improve his chances with white Wisconsin voters, Hersh resigned from the campaign.

When his book on chemical and biological warfare appeared, The New York Review of Books ran an excerpt, and The Washington Post covered the findings on its front page. Hersh spent the summer promoting the book in talks on campuses and at bookstores. With the US military’s defoliation program in South Vietnam gaining attention, the debate became ever more emotional. Congress held a hearing, and in November 1969 President Nixon announced that the United States would end the production of offensive biological-warfare agents and destroy its existing stockpiles. Without lobbying anyone in Congress or the White House, Hersh writes, he had helped “force a change [through] persistent reporting on an issue that needed public exposure.”

The press’s reluctance to report such discomfiting realities became even more glaring as Hersh pursued his next big story, which makes up the dramatic centerpiece of Reporter. In the fall of 1969, while working out of a small office in the National Press Building, he got a tip from a young lawyer named Geoffrey Cowan about a soldier who was being court-martialed for the murder of 75 civilians in My Lai, a village in South Vietnam. Cowan didn’t give the name of the perpetrator, an Army lieutenant, but Hersh, running into a colonel at the Pentagon, asked if he’d heard about the mass murder of civilians in Vietnam. “This Calley is a madman, Sy,” the officer said, noting that he’d even killed babies. “There’s no story in that.” But Hersh knew there was and, now supplied with the name of the officer, set out to track him down. “I liked being the best, the leader of the pack, and I sensed there was a game-changing story that revolved around William Calley, wherever he was. I was going to be the first reporter to find him,” Hersh writes. This is one of several-conscious flashes of vanity in Reporter—a quality that would ultimately cause serious problems for Hersh.

Traveling to Salt Lake City to interview Calley’s lawyer, Hersh provoked him into showing a file that contained the Army charge sheet, and after the lawyer took it back and placed it on his desk, Hersh, while continuing the interview, read it upside down; it stated that the actual number killed was 109. Aware that Calley was at Fort Benning, Georgia, Hersh set out to interview him. Sprawling over 285 square miles, Fort Benning is roughly the size of New York City—but, as
Hersh notes, “Tracking down people who did not want to be found was vital to what I did for a living, and I was good at it.” After a series of bluffs, browbeatings, blind alleys, and narrowly averted expulsions from the base, he managed to coax a former roommate of Calley’s into giving him the lieutenant’s address in the nearby town of Columbus, where he discovered a rattled, frightened, very pale young man. Calley agreed to be interviewed, and on the plane ride back, Hersh outlined his story on the My Lai massacre.

Finding an outlet for it would prove nearly as difficult as finding Calley. Both Life and Look magazines rejected the piece. Hersh was “devastated” and “frightened by the extent of self-censorship I was encountering in my profession.” Eventually, he gave the piece to David Obst of Dispatch, a small anti-war news agency; calling around to newspapers, Obst offered it to each of them for $100. The story was bought by dozens, including the Chicago Sun–Times, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the New York Post, and a number placed it on their front page. There was little follow-up, however, and, like Hersh’s initial report on chemical and biological warfare, the story did not have the hoped-for impact.

But then he read in The Washington Post about a former soldier named Ron Rid hen-hour, who said that he had been responsible for initiating the Army’s inquiry. Hersh immediately flew to Los Angeles to talk with him. Ridhouri said he had firsthand information from five members of Calley’s company who confirmed the scale of the atrocity. He provided the names and addresses of some of the witnesses, whom Hersh then tracked down. They in turn led him to Paul Meadlo, who, when interviewed on his Indiana farm, described the cold-blooded murder of women and children cowering in ditches. Hersh’s story appeared in many major papers, and Meadlo was interviewed on the CBS Evening News. With its grisly particulars, the story set off a wave of articles about American atrocities in Vietnam, further eroding support for the war. Hersh’s five pieces on My Lai earned him the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting—a rarity for a freelance journalist. A “fringe player” (as Hersh calls himself) had managed to scoop the entire press corps.

Hersh’s reporting on My Lai landed him a job first with The New Yorker and then, in 1972, with The New York Times. From early in his career, Hersh had wanted to work at that paper, with its unmatched influence, and Reporter records what happens when a headstrong and independent-minded individual joins a powerful institution with its own entrenched set of rules and traditions. Hersh clashed constantly with Abe Rosenthal, the Times’ equally tetchy executive editor, who was suspicious of Hersh’s left-leaning politics but nonetheless pushed him to do some of his best work.

Just beginning to turn against the war, Rosenthal sent Hersh to the Times’ Washington bureau to help move it in that direction. Hersh was disturbed to find that Henry Kissinger talked regularly on background with columnist James Reston and bureau chief Max Frankel, resulting in front-page articles with quotes from “an unnamed senior government official.” Setting out to expose the “secret world” of Washington, Hersh broke a dazzling array of stories, including one that summarized testimony from veterans about knowingly targeting North Vietnamese and Vietcong hospitals.

Hersh also turned his eye to domestic matters. By then, Watergate was dominating the news, and with the Times being regularly beaten on stories by The Washington Post, Rosenthal directed him to concentrate on the growing scandal. Over a roughly 10-week period in 1973, Hersh produced 42 articles, all “moving the needle closer to the President.” One day, he met in a restaurant with a former FBI official, who left behind a file containing copies of 17 wiretap requests—16 of them signed by Kissinger and aimed at his closest aides as well as top reporters. The story caused an explosion. Nearly as sensational was Hersh’s revelation that the CIA had extensive domestic operations, which spurred two major congressional investigations. In a taped conversation later made public, CIA director William Colby irritably remarked that Hersh “knows more about this place than I do.”

After Nixon’s resignation, Hersh decided to apply his investigative skills to the world of big business. His attempts to penetrate that realm are among the most instructive sections of Reporter, showing the many obstacles standing in the way of journalists who seek to do likewise. Hersh chose as his initial quarry Sidney Korshak, a low-profile Los Angeles lawyer with many ties to organized crime. The series required six months of work and cost tens of thousands of dollars. The Times editors fiddled with it so much that at one point Hersh threw a typewriter through a window in his office; he returned the next day to find the window replaced and the office cleared of glass, and not a word was said to him. But the editors questioned whether the finished product was worth the cost in time and money.

Undeterred, Hersh next proposed taking on Charles Bluhdorn, the CEO of the giant conglomerate Gulf and Western. After getting the go-ahead, Hersh “walked into four months of sheer hell.” Bluhdorn socialized with the Times’ publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, and Gulf and Western sent a stream of accusatory letters to both him and Rosenthal. The company also began investigating Hersh and his assistant, Jeff Gerth. The business editor, John Lee, savaged both men in a private memo, complaining that the material was “excessive, diffuse, and poorly organized,” and Hersh clashed repeatedly with Rosenthal over his use of anonymous sources. After Hersh handed in his 15,000-word “bill of attainder,” Lee and “his ass-kissing coterie of moronic editors” eviscerated it. The story was also lawyered to death, and in the end it caused barely a ripple.

“Writing about corporate America had sapped my energy, disappointed the editors, and unnerved me,” Hersh confesses. The courage that the paper had shown in taking on the president and the attorney general when publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971 “was nowhere to be seen when confronted by a gaggle of corporate con men who were struggling for their existence in the face of a major SEC investigation.” In trying to expose the power and prerogatives of a major conglomerate, Hersh had to deal with not only the formidable resources that the company could marshal—legal threats, pressure from executives, private investigations—but also the discomfort of his own editors. Hersh’s limitations as a journalist seem to have played a part as well; from his telling, his stories seemed to be examples of the dreary, impenetrable pieces about banks and corporations that investigative journalists too often turn out. In the end, he writes, “there would be no check on corporate America…. Greed had won out.”

In 1979, Hersh returned to the more comfortable world of national security and politics, producing books on Kissinger and John F. Kennedy, among others. In a mordant touch, Hersh recalls seeing a woman reading The Price of Power, his thick Kissinger tome, at a YMCA pool in suburban Maryland; half an hour later, he saw her asleep with the opened book shielding her face from the sun.

After Tina Brown took charge of The New Yorker in the early ’90s, Hersh rejoined the magazine and, on September 11, 2001, her successor, David Remnick, told him that he was “permanently assigned to the biggest story” of his career. According to Hersh, he periodically disagreed with Remnick over the reliability of the intelligence that Bush officials were using to justify their plans to invade
Iraq, but Remnick nonetheless allowed him to publish what he was learning about the administration’s internal deliberations.

Hersh’s greatest feat in this period was breaking, along with 60 Minutes, the story about the United States’ use of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This would be his last major scoop, and the sections in Reporter that come after it lack the sparkle and crispness of the earlier ones. They also raise troubling questions about Hersh’s professional evolution since the early 2000s.

In 2003, Hersh traveled to Damascus to interview President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. “One rarely discussed issue among journalists has to do with access,” he notes; “we of course tend to like those senior officials and leaders, such as Assad, who grant us interviews and speak openly with us. But access inevitably provokes ethical dilemmas.” Hersh, however, only superficially explores those dilemmas as he recounts his dealings with the Syrian president.

On the morning of February 14, 2005, he met Assad in Damascus and discussed his dispute with Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. At the end of the interview, Hersh found out that, while they were talking, Hariri had been murdered. He suspected he may have been used to create an alibi for an assassination perhaps ordered in advance by the Syrian president, and, despite pressure from The New Yorker, decided not to write about the meeting. In Reporter, he doesn’t explain why, observing simply that his decision not to write about the interview “did not prevent me from having further ones with Assad.” The Hariri assassination, he adds, “remains unsolved to this day.”

In these years, Hersh’s relationship with The New Yorker became increasingly strained. While he liked and respected Remnick, he writes, “I was troubled by what I saw as his closeness to Barack Obama during much of his career were becoming increasingly murky and questionable.

Hersh’s recent reporting has triggered much commentary about whether the great investigator has turned conspiracy theorist. In a searching analysis in the British magazine Prospect, Steve Bloomfield surmises that, “after decades of exposing lies told by the American government,” Hersh seems to have forgotten “that other governments have their own reasons for being mendacious too.” Pressed by Bloomfield in an interview to explain his lack of skepticism about the Syrian claims, Hersh demurred. Not once in Reporter does Hersh take note of Assad’s butchery and the hundreds of thousands of deaths his regime is responsible for.
LOOK AROUND

Andrew Bujalski’s strip-mall realism

by STUART KLAWANS

A light-fingered, warmhearted comedy about coping with the intolerable, Andrew Bujalski’s Support the Girls takes place in and around a brews-and-boobs restaurant—I mean, a family-friendly entertainment business—called Double Whammies, located on a frontage road of Interstate 10 in south-central Texas. You’ve probably traveled along similar stretches of highway, though directors rarely bother to capture them as intensively as Bujalski does, filling the opening of the movie with views of looping ramps and overpasses, sunless arcades of sooty concrete, sextuple straightaways vibrating with a perpetual whoosh and rumble. You’ll probably recognize the strip-mall architecture, too, even if you’ve never turned into a one-story, faux-ranch establishment such as Double Whammies for a signature Big-Ass Beer and a precisely clocked three minutes of flirtation. Bujalski’s setting is the American ubiquitous; and his central character, bar manager Lisa (Regina Hall), might be termed the American overlooked, as one of countless working women who keep themselves and everyone around them going, and do so with a smile.

Hints of instability begin with the film’s first human sound, which is Lisa’s sniffing as she sits in the Double Whammies parking lot, crying behind the wheel. Only after starting at a sudden rap on the car window—it’s a good-morning from Maci (Haley Lu Rich-
ardson), the waitress who will later be described as an angel sent to teach everyone about good attitude—does Lisa put on her professional grin and hop out, ready to march into a day's work.

She has a platoon of new job applicants to stuff into pink T-shirts and try out (Double Whammies evidently being a business with a high turnover); the young son of an employee to shelter until a waitress from another shift can be recruited for child care; and a kitchen to inspect (discreetly, glancingly) for evidence of rats. There's also an impromptu, not to say surreptitious, car wash to organize to raise funds for a waitress who was jailed the previous night, having decided to deal with an abusive boyfriend by aiming her car's front fender at him. And then there's that strange noise in the restaurant's ceiling.

Upon investigation, the banging overhead turns out to be a would-be burglar trapped in an HVAC duct. He's handled easily enough, the local cops being Double Whammies regulars. But the man's extraction proves to be the push that destabilizes everything for Lisa, until she eventually breaks down in the women's room in front of her closest workmate, Danyelle (Shayna McHayle)—breaks down laughing, that is. The alternative of screaming is still premature.

Bu jal ski, a stealthy filmmaker, develops these incidents in a style that's easygoing on the surface, as suits his mundane though odd choice of milieu. (In previous films, he's passed time in motel- and mall-based subcultures like computer-chess tournaments and fitness clubs.) Bujalski saves his punchiest image-making for the end—and even then, his strongest effects are not just understated but silent. Right before the climax, a series of wordless shots from Danyelle's point of view tell you everything she won't even bother to say about the men in Double Whammies and their notion of what's not just permitted, but cool. At the stunning finale, you know instinctively that Lisa, Maci, and Danyelle are sensing their mortality, and their freedom, simply from the way they look up to the sky. Until reaching those high points, though, Bujalski tips you off to his art only when he cuts to the way they look up to the sky. Until reach all Hall has to do among these flightier characters is remain grounded (she's dug into the Texas soil so well that when she requests something of a friend, she asks for a "fiver"); broadcast decency with the strength of a clear-channel station; and show, from the gut, how Lisa pulls herself back together after each new catastrophe. Which is to say, Hall does everything.

Have I mentioned, by the way, that I smiled almost nonstop through Support the Girls? I did that not because Bujalski was trying to be funny, or because it's amusing to see homely, boozy, out-of-shape men judge the looks and character of young women, but out of pleasure at the warmth and mutual responsibility that Lisa shares with her workmates. Maybe some of them are no better than they ought to be—and yet together, in an unacknowledged combat zone off the roar of I-10, they have some real laughs behind those professional smiles. They make a life.

Bu jal ski can make that collapse matter to you because Hall, as Lisa, is so solid. She's used to being the anchor of ensemble casts—in Girls Trip, for example—and here again she plays straight woman to bouncy Richardson, fierce and forthright McHayle, and others like Lea DeLaria as the bar's loyal, proudly butch customer, Bobo. All Hall has to do among these flightier characters is remain grounded (she's dug into the Texas soil so well that when she requests something of a friend, she asks for a "fiver"); broadcast decency with the strength of a clear-channel station; and show, from the gut, how Lisa pulls herself back together after each new catastrophe. Which is to say, Hall does everything.

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This column has put me in a retrospective mood, since it marks my 30th anniversary writing about films for The Nation. So it's fortunate that I have a 40th anniversary to write about, and a series to peg it to. For the second half of September, the Metrograph theater in Manhattan is offering a birthday salute to the distributor Icarus Films, screening 56 titles that demonstrate a principle dear to both that company and me: the conviction that a movie can have strong social or political content and still do something interesting as film.

I had the good luck to write on just that theme for one of the first pictures I reviewed here, Marcel Ophüls's Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie, and dozens of other films in the series implicitly make the same point. The Metrograph is showing, among others, Chris Marker's epic (or perhaps encyclopedic, or maybe satiric) recent history of the global left, A Grin Without a Cat; Patricio Guzmán's gorgeous meditation on astronomy and the collection of human remains, Nostalgia for the Light; Chantal Akerman's magnificent, wordless journey into the regions of her un-lived past, D'Est; Lynne Sachs's almost tactile resurrection of the resistance to the Vietnam War, Investigation of a Flame; and, for those in a truly retrospective mood, Hedy Honigmann's Forever, an infinitely touching documentary about the Père Lachaise cemetery and its visitors. If the Metrograph is far from you, please be aware that almost all of the films in the Icarus series are available on streaming services, making it possible for you, too, to look back, and look around.
Puzzle No. 3477

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS

1 Someone who brought Oscar home protects distressed Grouch with prayer (10)
6 Cautious women, we hear, concealing a summer activity (4)
9 Profit involving a share of rye or barley, perhaps (5)
10 Spoken instructions on how to turn 2 into 8 (or 18)
12 What you might wear on the slopes to bypass bugs (3,5)
13 Ask probing questions about federal organization, and settle early (6)
15 Drowsy moon’s terribly advanced (9)
16 Singable clip taken from ghostly rickroll (5)
17 Look at area in the back of the boat, staying on top of water (6)
19 Obnoxious agent beginning to tweet after talk show (9)
21 Coward backs Trotsky (4)
22 Tautology juxtaposed with random chat? That doesn’t go together (8)
25 Hospital resident with terrible pain and connection to nephrologist, marginally (9)

24 Component of tire ending in a mess (10)

26 Farewell, gold-plated pass (5)
27 A lunatic flips over fish (4)

DOWN

1 To begin with, children (1–17, e.g.) should never be put in these! (5)
2 Start to undermine monarch with, um, the makings of a nuclear weapon (7)
3 Replicate and recombine 28s of monastic breakfast food (8,5)
4 This might help you make strategic decisions: infuse egg, for instance, with hydrogen or yttrium (4,6)
5 Puppet made from wood and love (4)
7 Unfinished card game, according to rumor (7)
8 German octet pursuing me with carefree luxury craft (9)
11 Sing about spy, poet, and actress (6,7)
14 Relative redistributed letters from priest (10)
15 Thus, a boner pill originally terrified Bernie Sanders, for example (9)
18 Drag Affleck to Reverend Spooner—that’s where you might get some relief (7)
20 Weave tangled net at port, say (7)
23 Spook hits on family member (5)
24 Coward backs Trotsky (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3476

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