still don’t know why Sallie and I bothered to go to that party in the forest slope above Aspen. The people were all older than us and dull in a distinguished way, old enough that we, at forty-ish, passed as the occasion’s young ladies. The house was great—if you like Ralph Lauren-style chalets—a rugged luxury cabin at 9,000 feet complete with elk antlers, lots of kilims, and a wood-burning stove. We were preparing to leave, when our host said, “No, stay a little longer so I can talk to you.” He was an imposing man who’d made a lot of money.
He kept us waiting while the other guests drifted out into the summer night, and then sat us down at his authentically grainy wood table and said to me, "So? I hear you've written a couple of books."

I replied, "Several, actually."

He said, in the way you encourage your friend's seven-year-old to describe flute practice, "And what are they about?"

They were actually about quite a few different things, the six or seven out by then, but I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003, River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life.

He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. "And have you heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year?"

So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority.

Here, let me just say that my life is well sprinkled with lovely men, with a long succession of editors who have, since I was young, listened to and encouraged and published me, with my infinitely generous younger brother, with splendid friends of whom it could be said—like the Clerk in The Canterbury Tales I still remember from Mr. Pelen's class on Chaucer—"gladly would he learn and gladly teach." Still, there are these other men. Too. So, Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when Sallie interrupted.

So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it.

him, to say, "That's her book." Or tried to interrupt him anyway.

But he just continued on his way. She had to say, "That's her book" three or four times before he finally took it in. And then, as if in a nineteenth-century novel, he went athen. That I was indeed the author of the very important book it turned out he hadn't read, just read about in the New York Times Book Review a.
few months earlier, so confused the neat categories into which his world was sorted that he was stunned speechless—for a mo-
ment, before he began holding forth again. Being women, we were politely out of earshot before we started laughing, and we've never really stopped.

I like incidents of that sort, when forces that are usually so sneaky and hard to point out slither out of the grass and are as obvious as, say, an anaconda that's eaten a cow or an elephant turd on the carpet.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF SILENCINGS

Yes, people of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories, but the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my ex-
perience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about. Some men.

Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the pres-
sumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation

just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.

I wouldn't be surprised if part of the trajectory of Ameri-
can politics since 2001 was shaped by, say, the inability to hear Coleen Rowley, the FBI woman who issued those early warn-
ings about al-Qaeda, and it was certainly shaped by a Bush ad-
ministration to which you couldn't tell anything, including that Iraq had no links to al-Qaeda and no WMDs, or that the war was not going to be a "cakewalk." (Even male experts couldn't penetrate the fortress of its smugness.)

Arrogance might have had something to do with the war, but this syndrome is a war that nearly every woman faces every day, a war within herself too, a belief in her superfluity, an in-
vitation to silence, one from which a fairly nice career as a writer (with a lot of research and facts correctly deployed) has not entirely freed me. After all, there was a moment there when I was willing to let Mr. Important and his overweening confi-
dence bowl over my more shaky certainty.

Don't forget that I've had a lot more confirmation of my right to think and speak than most women, and I've learned that a certain amount of self-doubt is a good tool for correct-
ing, understanding, listening, and progressing—though too much is paralyzing and total self-confidence produces arrogant idiots. There's a happy medium between these poles to which the genders have been pushed, a warm equatorial belt of give and take where we should all meet.
More extreme versions of our situation exist in, for example, those Middle Eastern countries where women's testimony has no legal standing: so that a woman can't testify that she was raped without a male witness to counter the male rapist. Which there rarely is.

Credibility is a basic survival tool. When I was very young and just beginning to get what feminism was about and why it was necessary, I had a boyfriend whose uncle was a nuclear physicist. One Christmas, he was telling—as though it were a light and amusing subject—how a neighbor's wife in his suburban bomb-making community had come running out of her house naked in the middle of the night screaming that her husband was trying to kill her. How, I asked, did you know that he wasn't trying to kill her? He explained, patiently, that they were respectable middle-class people. Therefore, her husband—trying-to-kill-her was simply not a credible explanation for her fleeing the house yelling that her husband was trying to kill her. That she was crazy, on the other hand....

Even getting a restraining order—a fairly new legal tool—requires acquiring the credibility to convince the courts that some guy is a menace and then getting the cops to enforce it. Restraining orders often don't work anyway. Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist. About three women a day are murdered by spouses or ex-spouses in this country. It's one of the main causes of death for pregnant women in the United States. At the heart of the struggle of feminism to give rape, date rape, marital rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible.

I tend to believe that women acquired the status of human beings when these kinds of acts started to be taken seriously, when the big things that stop us and kill us were addressed legally from the mid-1970s on; well after, that is, my birth. And for anyone about to argue that workplace sexual intimidation isn't a life-or-death issue, remember that Marine Lance Corporal Maria Lauterbach, age twenty, was apparently killed by her higher-ranking colleague one winter's night while she was waiting to testify that he raped her. The burned remains of her pregnant body were found in the fire pit in his backyard.

Being told that, categorically, he knows what he's talking about and she doesn't, however minor a part of any given conversation, perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light. After my book Wanderlust came out in 2000, I found myself better able to resist being bullied out of my own perceptions and interpretations. On two occasions around that time, I objected to the behavior of a man, only to be told that the incidents hadn't happened at all as I said, that I was subjective, delusional, overwrought, dishonest—in a nutshell, female.
Most of my life, I would have doubted myself and backed down. Having public standing as a writer of history helped me stand my ground, but few women get that boost, and billions of women must be out there on this seven-billion-person planet being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives,

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that the truth is not their property, now or ever. This goes way beyond Men Explaining Things, but it’s part of the same archipelago of arrogance.

Men explain things to me, still. And no man has ever apologized for explaining, wrongly, things that I know and they don’t. Not yet, but according to the actuarial tables, I may have another forty-something years to live, more or less, so it could happen. Though I’m not holding my breath.

WOMEN FIGHTING ON TWO FRONTST

A few years after the idiot in Aspen, I was in Berlin giving a talk when the Marxist writer Tariq Ali invited me out to a dinner that included a male writer and translator and three women a little younger than me who would remain deferential and mostly silent throughout the dinner. Tariq was great. Perhaps the translator was peeved that I insisted on playing a modest role in the conversation, but when I said something about how Women Strike for Peace, the extraordinary, little-known anti-nuclear and antiwar group founded in 1961, helped bring down the communist-hunting House Committee on Un-American Activities, HUAC, Mr. Very Important II sneered at me. HUAC, he insisted, didn’t exist by the early 1960s and, anyway, no women’s group played such a role in HUAC’s downfall. His scorn was so withering, his confidence so aggressive, that arguing with him seemed a scary exercise in futility and an invitation to more insult.

I think I was at nine books at that point, including one that drew from primary documents about and interviews with a key member of Women Strike for Peace. But explaining men still assume I am, in some sort of obscene impregnation metaphor, an empty vessel to be filled with their wisdom and knowledge. A Freudian would claim to know what they have and I lack, but intelligence is not situated in the crotch—even
if you can write one of Virginia Woolf’s long mellifluous musical sentences about the subtle subjugation of women in the snow with your willie. Back in my hotel room, I searched online a bit and found that Eric Bentley in his definitive history of the House Committee on Un-American Activities credits Women Strike for Peace with “striking the crucial blow in the fall ofHUAC’s Bastille.” In the early 1960s.

So I opened an essay (on Jane Jacobs, Betty Friedan, and Rachel Carson) for the Nation with this interchange, in part as a shout-out to one of the more unpleasant men who have explained things to me: Dude, if you’re reading this, you’re a carbuncle on the face of humanity and an obstacle to civilization. Feel the shame.

The battle with Men Who Explain Things has trampled down many women—of my generation, of the up-and-coming generation we need so badly, here and in Pakistan and Bolivia and Java, not to speak of the countless women who came before me and were not allowed into the laboratory, or the library, or the conversation, or the revolution, or even the category called human.

After all, Women Strike for Peace was founded by women who were tired of making the coffee and doing the typing and not having any voice or decision-making role in the anti-nuclear movement of the 1950s. Most women fight wars on two fronts, one for whatever the putative topic is and one simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being. Things have gotten better, but this war won’t end in my lifetime. I’m still fighting it, for myself certainly, but also for all those younger women who have something to say, in the hope that they will get to say it.
POSTSCRIPT

One evening over dinner in March 2008, I began to joke, as I often had before, about writing an essay called "Men Explain Things to Me." Every writer has a stable of ideas that never make it to the racetrack, and I'd been trotting this pony out recreationally once in a while. My houseguest, the brilliant theorist and activist Marina Sitrin, insisted that I had to write it down because people like her younger sister Sam needed to read it. Young women, she said, needed to know that being belittled wasn't the result of their own secret failings; it was the boring old gender wars, and it happened to most of us who were female at some point or other.

I wrote it in one sitting early the next morning. When something assembles itself that fast, it's clear it's been composing itself somewhere in the unknowable back of the mind for a long time. It wanted to be written; it was restless for the racetrack; it galloped along once I sat down at the computer. Since Marina slept in later than me in those days, I served it for breakfast and later that day sent it to Tom Engelhardt at TomDispatch, who published it online soon after. It spread quickly, as essays put up at Tom's site do, and has never stopped going around, being reposted and shared and commented upon. It's circulated like nothing else I've done.

It struck a chord. And a nerve.

Some men explained why men explaining things to women wasn't really a gendered phenomenon. Usually, women then pointed out that, in insisting on their right to dismiss the experiences women say they have, men succeeded in explaining in just the way I said they sometimes do. (For the record, I do believe that women have explained things in patronizing ways to men among others. But that's not indicative of the massive power differential that takes far more sinister forms as well or of the broad pattern of how gender works in our society.)

Other men got it and were cool. This was, after all, written in the era when male feminists had become a more meaningful presence, and feminism was funnier than ever. Not everyone knew they were funny, however. At TomDispatch in 2008, I got an email from an older man in Indianapolis, who wrote in to tell me that he had "never personally or professionally shortchanged a woman" and went on to berate me for not hanging out with "more regular guys or at least do a little homework first." He then gave me some advice about how to run my life and commented on my "feelings of inferiority." He thought that being patronized was an experience a woman chooses to have, or could choose not to have—and so the fault was all mine.

A website named "Academic Men Explain Things to Me" arose, and hundreds of university women shared their stories of being patronized, belittled, talked over, and more. The term
"mansplaining" was coined soon after the piece appeared, and I was sometimes credited with it. In fact, I had nothing to do with its actual creation, though my essay, along with all the men who embodied the idea, apparently inspired it. (I have doubts about the word and don't use it myself much; it seems to me to go a little heavy on the idea that men are inherently flawed this way, rather than that some men explain things they shouldn't and don't hear things they should. If it's not clear enough in the piece, I love it when people explain things to me they know and I'm interested in but don't yet know; it's when they explain things to me I know and they don't that the conversation goes wrong.) By 2012, the term "mansplained"—one of the New York Times's words of the year for 2010—was being used in mainstream political journalism.

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Alas, this was because it dovetailed pretty well with the times. TomDispatch reposted "Men Explain Things to Me" in August 2012, and fortuitously, more or less simultaneously, Representative Todd Akin (R-Missouri) made his infamous statement that we don't need abortion for women who are raped, because "if it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down." That electoral season was peppered by the crazy pro-rape, anti-fact statements of male conservatives. And salted with feminists pointing out why feminism is necessary and why these guys are scary. It was nice to be one of the voices in that conversation; the piece had a big revival.

Chords, nerves: the thing is still circulating as I write. The point of the essay was never to suggest that I think I am notably oppressed. It was to take these conversations as the narrow end of the wedge that opens up space for men and closes it off for women, space to speak, to be heard, to have rights, to participate, to be respected, to be a full and free human being. This is one way that, in polite discourse, power is expressed—the same power that in impolite discourse and in physical acts of intimidation and violence, and very often in how the world is organized—silences and erases and annihilates women, as equals, as participants, as human beings with rights, and far too often as living beings.

The battle for women to be treated like human beings with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of involvement in cultural
and political arenas continues, and it is sometimes a pretty grim battle. I surprised myself when I wrote the essay, which began with an amusing incident and ended with rape and murder. That made clear to me the continuum that stretches from minor social misery to violent silencing and violent death (and I think we would understand misogyny and violence against women even better if we looked at the abuse of power as a whole rather than treating domestic violence separately from rape and murder and harrassment and intimidation, online and at home and in the workplace and in the streets; seen together, the pattern is clear).

Having the right to show up and speak are basic to survival, to dignity, and to liberty. I'm grateful that, after an early life of being silenced, sometimes violently, I grew up to have a voice. circumstances that will always bind me to the rights of the voiceless.
The Longest War

2013

Here in the United States, where there is a reported rape every 6.2 minutes, and one in five women will be raped in her lifetime, the rape and gruesome murder of a young woman on a bus in New Delhi on December 16, 2012, was treated as an exceptional incident. The story of the sexual assault of an unconscious teenager by members of the Steubenville High School football team in Ohio was still unfolding, and gang rapes aren’t that unusual here either. Take your pick: some of the twenty men who gang-raped an eleven-
year-old in Cleveland, Texas, were sentenced shortly beforehand, while the instigator of the gang rape of a sixteen-year-old in Richmond, California, was sentenced in that fall of 2012 too, and four men who gang-raped a fifteen-year-old near New Orleans were sentenced that April, though the six men who gang-raped a fourteen-year-old in Chicago that year were still at large. Not that I went out looking for incidents: they're everywhere in the news, though no one adds them up and indicates that there might actually be a pattern.

There is, however, a pattern of violence against women that's broad and deep and horrific and incessantly overlooked. Occasionally, a case involving a celebrity or lurid details in a particular case get a lot of attention in the media, but such cases are treated as anomalies, while the abundance of incidental news items about violence against women in this country, in other countries, on every continent including Antarctica, constitute a kind of background wallpaper for the news.

If you'd rather talk about bus rapes than gang rapes, there was the rape of a developmentally disabled woman on a Los Angeles bus that November and the kidnapping of an autistic sixteen-year-old on the regional transit train system in Oakland, California—she was raped repeatedly by her abductor over two days this winter—and a gang rape of multiple women on a bus in Mexico City recently, too. While I was writing this, I read that another female bus rider was kidnapped in India and gang-raped all night by the bus driver and five of his friends who must have thought what happened in New Delhi was awesome.

We have an abundance of rape and violence against women in this country and on this Earth, though it's almost never

Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender.

treated as a civil rights or human rights issue, or a crisis, or even a pattern. Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender.

Here I want to say one thing: though virtually all the perpetrators of such crimes are men, that doesn't mean all men are violent. Most are not. In addition, men obviously also suffer violence, largely at the hands of other men, and every violent death, every assault is terrible. Women can and do engage in intimate partner violence, but recent studies state that these acts don't often result in significant injury, let alone death; on the other hand, men murdered by their partners are often killed in self-defense, and intimate violence sends a lot of
women to the hospital and the grave. But the subject here is the pandemic of violence by men against women, both intimate violence and stranger violence.

WHAT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT WHEN WE DON'T TALK ABOUT GENDER

There's so much of it. We could talk about the assault and rape of a seventy-three-year-old in Manhattan's Central Park in September 2012, or the recent rape of a four-year-old and an eighty-three-year-old in Louisiana, or the New York City policeman who was arrested in October of 2012 for what appeared to be serious plans to kidnap, rape, cook, and eat a woman, any woman, because the hate wasn't personal (although maybe it was for the San Diego man who actually killed and cooked his wife in November and the man from New Orleans who killed, dismembered, and cooked his girlfriend in 2005).

Those are all exceptional crimes, but we could also talk about quotidian assaults, because though a rape is reported only every 6.2 minutes in this country, the estimated total is perhaps five times as high. Which means that there may be very nearly a rape a minute in the United States. It all adds up to tens of millions of rape victims. A significant portion of the women you know are survivors.

We could talk about high-school- and college-athlete rapes, or campus rapes, to which university authorities have been appallingly uninterested in responding in many cases, including that high school in Steubenville, Notre Dame University, Amherst College, and many others. We could talk about the escalating pandemic of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment in the US military, where Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta estimated that there were nineteen thousand sexual assaults on fellow soldiers in 2010 alone and that the great majority of assailants got away with it, though four-star general Jeffrey Sinclair was indicted in September for "a slew of sex crimes against women."

Never mind workplace violence, let's go home. So many men murder their partners and former partners that we have well over a thousand homicides of that kind a year—meaning that every three years the death toll tops 9/11's casualties, though no one declares a war on this particular kind of terror. (Another way to put it: the more than 11,766 corpses from domestic-violence homicides between 9/11 and 2012 exceed the number of deaths of victims on that day and all American soldiers killed in the "war on terror."

If we talked about crimes like these and why they are so common, we'd have to talk about what kinds of profound change this society, or this nation, or nearly every nation needs. If we talked about it, we'd be talking about masculinity, or male roles, or maybe patriarchy, and we don't talk much about that.
Instead, we hear that American men commit murder-suicides—at the rate of about twelve a week—because the economy is bad, though they also do it when the economy is good; or that those men in India murdered the bus rider because the poor re-

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sent the rich, while other rapes in India are explained by how the rich exploit the poor; and then there are those ever-popular explanations: mental problems and intoxicants—and for jocks, head injuries. The latest spin is that lead exposure was responsible for a lot of our violence, except that both genders are exposed and one commits most of the violence. The pandemic of violence always gets explained as anything but gender, anything but what would seem to be the broadest explanatory pattern of all.

Someone wrote a piece about how white men seem to be the ones who commit mass murders in the United States and the (mostly hostile) commenters only seemed to notice the white part. It’s rare that anyone says what this medical study does, even if in the driest way possible: “Being male has been identified as a risk factor for violent criminal behavior in several studies, as have exposure to tobacco smoke before birth, having antisocial parents, and belonging to a poor family.”

It’s not that I want to pick on men. I just think that if we noticed that women are, on the whole, radically less violent, we might be able to theorize where violence comes from and what we can do about it a lot more productively. Clearly the ready availability of guns is a huge problem for the United States, but despite this availability to everyone, murder is still a crime committed by men 90 percent of the time.

The pattern is plain as day. We could talk about this as a global problem, looking at the epidemic of assault, harassment, and rape of women in Cairo’s Tahrir Square that has taken away the freedom they celebrated during the Arab Spring—and led some men there to form defense teams to help counter it—or the persecution of women in public and private in India from “Eve-teasing” to bride-burning, or “honor killings” in South Asia and the Middle East, or the way that South Africa has be-
come a global rape capital, with an estimated six hundred thousand rapes last year, or how rape has been used as a tactic and "weapon" of war in Mali, Sudan, and the Congo, as it was in the former Yugoslavia, or the pervasiveness of rape and harassment in Mexico and the femicide in Juarez, or the denial of basic rights for women in Saudi Arabia and the myriad sexual assaults on immigrant domestic workers there, or the way that the Dominique Strauss-Kahn case in the United States revealed what impunity he and others had in France, and it's only for lack of space I'm leaving out Britain and Canada and Italy (with its ex-prime minister known for his orgies with the underaged), Argentina and Australia and so many other countries.

WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO KILL YOU?

But maybe you're tired of statistics. So let's just talk about a single incident that happened in my city while I was researching this essay in January 2013. One of many local incidents that made the local papers that month in which men assaulted women:

A woman was stabbed after she rebuffed a man's sexual advances while she walked in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood late Monday night, a police spokesman said today. The 33-year-old victim was walking down the street when a stranger approached her and propositioned her, po-

lice spokesman Officer Albie Esparza said. When she rejected him, the man became very upset and slashed the victim in the face and stabbed her in the arm, Esparza said.

The man, in other words, framed the situation as one in which his chosen victim had no rights and liberties, while he had the right to control and punish her. This should remind us that violence is first of all authoritarian. It begins with this premise: I have the right to control you.

Murder is the extreme version of that authoritarianism, where the murderer asserts he has the right to decide whether you live or die, the ultimate means of controlling someone. This may be true even if you are obedient, because the desire to control comes out of a rage that obedience can't assuage. Whatever fears, whatever sense of vulnerability may underlie such behavior, it also comes out of entitlement, the entitlement to inflict suffering and even death on other people. It breeds misery in the perpetrator and the victims.

As for that incident in my city, similar things happen all the time. Many versions of it happened to me when I was younger, sometimes involving death threats and often involving torrents of obscenities: a man approaches a woman with both desire and the furious expectation that the desire will likely be rebuffed. The fury and desire come in a package, all twisted together into something that always threatens to turn eros into thanatos, love into death, sometimes literally.
It's a system of control. It's why so many intimate-partner murders are of women who dared to break up with those partners. As a result, it imprisons a lot of women, and though you could say that the Tenderloin attacker on January 7, or a brutal would-be-rapist near my own neighborhood on January 5, or another rapist here on January 12, or the San Franciscan who on January 6 set his girlfriend on fire for refusing to do his laundry, or the guy who was just sentenced to 370 years for some particularly violent rapes in San Francisco in late 2011, were marginal characters, rich, famous, and privileged guys do it, too.

The Japanese vice-consul in San Francisco was charged with twelve felony counts of spousal abuse and assault with a deadly weapon in September 2012, the same month that, in the same town, the ex-girlfriend of Mason Mayer (brother of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer) testified in court: "He ripped out my earrings, tore my eyelashes off, while spitting in my face and telling me how unlovable I am . . . . I was on the ground in the fetal position, and when I tried to move, he squeezed both knees tighter into my sides to restrain me and slapped me." According to San Francisco Chronicle reporter Vivian Ho, she also testified that "Mayer slammed her head onto the floor repeatedly and pulled out clumps of her hair, telling her that the only way she was leaving the apartment alive was if he drove her to the Golden Gate Bridge ‘where you can jump off or I will push you off.’" Mason Mayer got probation.

The summer before, an estranged husband violated his wife's restraining order against him, shooting her—and killing or wounding six other women—at her workplace in suburban Milwaukee, but since there were only four corpses the crime was largely overlooked in the media in a year with so many more spectacular mass murders in this country (and we still haven't really talked about the fact that, of sixty-two mass shootings in the United States in three decades, only one was by a woman, because when you say lone gun man, everyone talks about loners and guns but not about men—and by the way, nearly two-thirds of all women killed by guns are killed by their partner or ex-partner).

What's love got to do with it, asked Tina Turner, whose ex-husband Ike once said, "Yeah I hit her, but I didn't hit her more than the average guy beats his wife." A woman is beaten every nine seconds in this country. Just to be clear: not nine minutes, but nine seconds. It's the number-one cause of injury to American women; of the two million injured annually, more than half a million of those injuries require medical attention while about 145,000 require overnight hospitalizations, according to the Center for Disease Control, and you don't want to know about the dentistry needed afterwards. Spouses are also the leading cause of death for pregnant women in the United States.

"Women worldwide ages 15 through 44 are more likely to die or be maimed because of male violence than because of
cancer, malaria, war and traffic accidents combined," writes Nicholas D. Kristof, one of the few prominent figures to address the issue regularly.

THE CHASM BETWEEN OUR WORLDS

Rape and other acts of violence, up to and including murder, as well as threats of violence, constitute the barrage some men lay down as they attempt to control some women, and fear of that violence limits most women in ways they’ve gotten so used to they hardly notice—and we hardly address. There are exceptions: last summer someone wrote to me to describe a college class in which the students were asked what they do to stay safe from rape. The young women described the intricate ways they stayed alert, limited their access to the world, took precautions, and essentially thought about rape all the time (while the young men in the class, he added, gaped in astonishment). The chasm between their worlds had briefly and suddenly become visible.

Mostly, however, we don’t talk about it—though a graphic has been circulating on the Internet called "Ten Top Tips to End Rape," the kind of thing young women get often enough, but this one had a subversive twist. It offered advice like this: "Carry a whistle! If you are worried you might assault someone 'by accident' you can hand it to the person you are with, so they can call for help." While funny, the piece points out something terrible: the usual guidelines in such situations put the full burden of prevention on potential victims, treating the violence as a given. There’s no good reason (and many bad reasons) colleges spend more time telling women how to survive predators than telling the other half of their students not to be predators.

Threats of sexual assault now seem to take place online regularly. In late 2011, British columnist Laurie Penny wrote, An opinion, it seems, is the short skirt of the Internet. Having one and flaunting it is somehow asking an amorphous mass of almost—entirely male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they’d like to rape, kill, and urinate on you. This week, after a particularly ugly slew of threats, I decided to make just a few of those messages public on Twitter, and the response I received was overwhelming. Many could not believe the hate I received, and many more began to share their own stories of harassment, intimidation, and abuse.

Women in the online gaming community have been harassed, threatened, and driven out. Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic who documented such incidents, received support for her work, but also, in the words of a journalist, "another wave of really aggressive, you know, violent personal threats, her accounts attempted to be hacked. And one man in Ontario took the step of making an online video game where you could punch Anita’s image on the screen. And if you
punched it multiple times, bruises and cuts would appear on her image." The difference between these online gamers and the Taliban men who, last October, tried to murder fourteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai for speaking out about the right of Pakistani women to education is one of degree. Both are trying to silence and punish women for claiming voice, power, and the right to participate. Welcome to Manistan.

THE PARTY FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF RAPISTS

It’s not just public, or private, or online either. It’s also embedded in our political system, and our legal system, which before feminists fought for us didn’t recognize most domestic violence, or sexual harassment and stalking, or date rape, or acquaintance rape, or marital rape, and in cases of rape still often tries the victim rather than the rapist, as though only perfect maidens could be assaulted—or believed.

As we learned in the 2012 election campaign, it’s also embedded in the minds and mouths of our politicians. Remember that spate of crazy pro-rape things Republican men said last summer and fall, starting with Todd Akin’s notorious claim that a woman has ways of preventing pregnancy in cases of rape, a statement he made in order to deny women control over their own bodies (in the form of access to abortion after rape). After that, of course, Senate candidate Richard Mourdock claimed that rape pregnancies were "a gift from God," and soon after another Republican politician piped up to defend Akin’s comment.

Happily the five publicly pro-rape Republicans in the 2012 campaign all lost their election bids. (Stephen Colbert tried to warn them that women had gotten the vote in 1920.) But it’s not just a matter of the garbage they say (and the price they now pay). Congressional Republicans refused to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act because they objected to the protection it gave immigrants, transgender women, and Native American women. (Speaking of epidemics, one of three Native American women will be raped, and on the reservations 88 percent of those rapes are by non-Native men who know tribal governments can’t prosecute them. So much for rape as a crime of passion—these are crimes of calculation and opportunism.)

And they’re out to gut reproductive rights—birth control as well as abortion, as they’ve pretty effectively done in many states over the last dozen years. What’s meant by "reproductive rights," of course, is the right of women to control their own bodies. Didn’t I mention earlier that violence against women is a control issue?

And though rapes are often investigated lackadaisically—there is a backlog of about four hundred thousand untested rape kits in this country—rapists who impregnate their victims
have parental rights in thirty-one states. Oh, and former vice-presidential candidate and current congressman Paul Ryan (R-Manitain) is reintroducing a bill that would give states the right to ban abortions and might even conceivably allow a rapist to sue his victim for having one.

**ALL THE THINGS THAT AREN'T TO BLAME**

Of course, women are capable of all sorts of major unpleasantness, and there are violent crimes by women, but the so-called war of the sexes is extraordinarily lopsided when it comes to actual violence. Unlike the last (male) head of the International Monetary Fund, the current (female) head is not going to assault an employee at a luxury hotel; top-ranking female officers in the US military, unlike their male counterparts, are not accused of any sexual assaults; and young female athletes, unlike those male football players in Steubenville, aren't likely to urinate on unconscious boys, let alone violate them and boast about it in YouTube videos and Twitter feeds.

No female bus riders in India have ganged up to sexually assault a man so badly he dies of his injuries, nor are marauding packs of women terrorizing men in Cairo's Tahrir Square, and there's just no maternal equivalent to the 11 percent of rapes that are by fathers or stepfathers. Of the people in prison in the United States, 93.5 percent are not women, and though quite a lot of the prisoners should not be there in the first place, maybe some of them should because of violence, until we think of a better way to deal with it, and them.

No major female pop star has blown the head off a young man she took home with her, as did Phil Spector. (He is now part of that 93.5 percent for the shotgun slaying of Lana Clarkson, apparently for refusing his advances.) No female action-movie star has been charged with domestic violence, because Angelina Jolie just isn't doing what Mel Gibson and Steve McQueen did, and there aren't any celebrated female movie directors who gave a thirteen-year-old drugs before sexually assaulting that child, while she kept saying "no," as did Roman Polanski.

**IN MEMORY OF JYOTI SINGH**

What's the matter with manhood? There's something about how masculinity is imagined, about what's praised and encouraged, about the way violence is passed on to boys that needs to be addressed. There are lovely and wonderful men out there, and one of the things that's encouraging in this round of the war against women is how many men I've seen who get it, who think it's their issue too, who stand up for us and with us in everyday life, online and in the marches from New Delhi to San Francisco this winter.
Increasingly men are becoming good allies—and there always have been some. Kindness and gentleness never had a gender, and neither did empathy. Domestic violence statistics are down significantly from earlier decades (even though they’re still shockingly high), and a lot of men are at work crafting new ideas and ideals about masculinity and power.

Gay men have redefined and occasionally undermined conventional masculinity—publicly, for many decades—and often been great allies for women. Women’s liberation has often been portrayed as a movement intent on encroaching upon or taking power and privilege away from men, as though in some dismal zero-sum game, only one gender at a time could be free and powerful. But we are free together or slaves together. Surely the mindset of those who think they need to win, to dominate, to punish, to reign supreme must be terrible and far from free, and giving up this unachievable pursuit would be liberatory.

There are other things I’d rather write about, but this affects everything else. The lives of half of humanity are still dogged by, drained by, and sometimes ended by this pervasive variety of violence. Think of how much more time and energy we would have to focus on other things that matter if we weren’t so busy surviving. Look at it this way: one of the best journalists I know is afraid to walk home at night in our neighborhood. Should she stop working late? How many women have had to stop doing their work, or been stopped from doing it, for similar reasons? It’s clear now that monumental

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harrassment online keeps many women from speaking up and writing altogether.

One of the most exciting new political movements on Earth is the Native Canadian indigenous rights movement, with feminist and environmental overtones, called Idle No More. On December 27, shortly after the movement took off, a Native woman was kidnapped, raped, beaten, and left for dead in Thunder Bay, Ontario, by men whose remarks framed the crime as retaliation against Idle No More. Afterward, she walked four hours through the bitter cold and survived to tell her tale. Her assailants, who have threatened to do it again, are still at large.
The New Delhi rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, the twenty-three-year-old who was studying physiotherapy so that she could better herself while helping others, and the assault on her male companion (who survived) seem to have triggered the reaction that we have needed for one hundred, or one thousand, or five thousand years. May she be to women—and men—worldwide what Emmett Till, murdered by white supremacists in 1955, was to African Americans and the then-nascent US civil rights movement.

We have far more than eighty-seven thousand rapes in this country every year, but each of them is invariably portrayed as an isolated incident. We have dots so close they're splatters melting into a stain, but hardly anyone connects them, or names that stain. In India they did. They said that this is a civil rights issue, it's a human rights issue, it's everyone's problem, it's not isolated, and it's never going to be acceptable again. It has to change. It's your job to change it, and mine, and ours.
Woolf's Darkness

EMBRACING THE INEXPLICABLE

2009

"The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think," Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal on January 18, 1915, when she was almost thirty-three years old and the First World War was beginning to turn into catastrophic slaughter on an unprecedented scale that would continue for years. Belgium was occupied, the continent was at war, many of the European nations were also invading other places around the world, the Panama Canal had just opened, the US
economy was in terrible shape, twenty-nine people had just died in an Italian earthquake, Zeppelins were about to attack Great Yarmouth, launching the age of aerial bombing against civilians, and the Germans were just weeks away from using poison gas for the first time on the Western Front. Woolf, however, might have been writing about her own future rather than the world’s.

She was less than six months past a bout of madness or depression that had led to a suicide attempt, and was still being tended or guarded by nurses. Until then, in fact, her madness and the war had followed a similar calendar, but Woolf recovered and the war continued its downward plunge for nearly four more bloody years. The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think. It’s an extraordinary declaration, asserting that the unknown need not be turned into the known through false divination or the projection of grim political or ideological narratives; it’s a celebration of darkness, willing— as that “I think” indicates— to be uncertain even about its own assertion.

Most people are afraid of the dark. Literally when it comes to children, while many adults fear, above all, the darkness that is the unknown, the unseeable, the obscure. And yet the night in which distinctions and definitions cannot be readily made is the same night in which love is made, in which things merge, change, become enchanted, aroused, impregnated, possessed, released, renewed.

As I began writing this essay, I picked up a book on wilderness survival by Laurence Gonzalez and found in it this telling sentence: “The plan, a memory of the future, tries on reality to see if it fits.” His point is that when the two seem incompatible we often hang onto the plan, ignore the warnings reality offers us, and so plunge into trouble. Afraid of the darkness of the unknown, the spaces in which we see only dimly, we often choose the darkness of closed eyes, of obliviousness. Gonzalez adds, “Researchers point out that people tend to take any information as confirmation of their mental models. We are by nature optimists, if optimism means that we believe we see the world as it is. And under the influence of a plan, it’s easy to see what we want to see.” It’s the job of writers and explorers to see more, to travel light when it comes to preconception, to go into the dark with their eyes open.

Not all of them aspire to do so or succeed. Nonfiction has crept closer to fiction in our time in ways that are not flattering to fiction, in part because too many writers cannot come to terms with the ways in which the past, like the future, is dark. There is so much we don’t know, and to write truthfully about a life, your own or your mother’s, or a celebrated figure’s, an event, a crisis, another culture is to engage repeatedly with those patches of darkness, those nights of history, those places of unknowing. They tell us that there are limits to knowledge, that there are essential mysteries, starting with the notion that
we know just what someone thought or felt in the absence of exact information.

Often enough, we don’t know such things even when it comes to ourselves, let alone someone who perished in an epoch whose very textures and reflexes were unlike ours. Filling in the blanks replaces the truth that we don’t entirely know with the false sense that we do. We know less when we erroneously think we know than when we recognize that we don’t. Sometimes I think these pretenses at authoritative knowledge are failures of language: the language of bold assertion is simpler, less taxing, than the language of nuance.

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and ambiguity and speculation. Woolf was unparalleled at that latter language.

What is the value of darkness, and of venturing unknowing into the unknown? Virginia Woolf is present in five of my books in this century, *Wanderlust*, my history of walking; *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, a book about the uses of wandering and the unknown; *Inside Out*, which focused on house and home fantasies; *The Faraway Nearby*, a book about storytelling, empathy, illness, and unexpected connections; and *Hope in the Dark*, a small book exploring popular power and how change unfolds. Woolf has been a touchstone author for me, one of my pantheon, along with Jorge Luis Borges, Isak Dinesen, George Orwell, Henry David Thoreau, and a few others.

Even her name has a little wildness to it. The French call dusk the time "entre le chien et le loup," between the dog and the wolf, and certainly in marrying a Jew in the England of her era Virginia Stephen was choosing to go a little feral, to step a little beyond the proprieties of her class and time. While there are many Woolfs, mine has been a Virgil guiding me through the uses of wandering, getting lost, anonymity, immersion, uncertainty, and the unknown. I made that sentence of hers about darkness the epigram that drove *Hope in the Dark*, my 2004 book about politics and possibility, written to counter despair in the aftermath of the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq.
LOOKING, LOOKING AWAY, LOOKING AGAIN

I began my book with that sentence about darkness. The cultural critic and essayist Susan Sontag whose Woolf is not quite my Woolf opened her 2003 book on empathy and photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, with a quote from a later Woolf. She began this way: “In June 1938 Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, her brave, unwelcomed reflections on the roots of war.” Sontag went on to examine Woolf’s refusal of the “we” in the question that launches the book: “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?”—which she answered instead with the statement, “As a woman I have no country.”

Sontag then argues with Woolf about that: we, about photography, about the possibility of preventing war. She argues with respect, with an awareness that historical circumstances had changed radically (including the status of women as outsiders), with the utopianism of Woolf’s era that imagined an end to war altogether. She doesn’t only argue with Woolf. She argues with herself, rejecting her earlier argument in her landmark book *On Photography* that we grow deadened to images of atrocity and speculating on how we must continue to look. Because the atrocities don’t end and somehow we must engage with them.

Sontag ends her book with thoughts about those in the midst of the kind of war that raged in Iraq and Afghanistan. As she wrote of people in war, “We”—this ‘we’ is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying, war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine.”

Sontag, too, calls on us to embrace the darkness, the unknown, the unknowability, not to let the torrent of images that pour down on us convince us that we understand or make us numb to suffering. She argues that knowledge can numb as well as awaken feeling. But she doesn’t imagine the contradictions can be ironed out; she grants us permission to keep looking at the photographs; she grants their subjects the right to have the unknowability of their experience acknowledged. And she herself acknowledges that even if we can’t completely comprehend, we might care.

Sontag doesn’t address our inability to respond to entirely unseen suffering, for even in this era of daily email solicitations about loss and atrocity and amateur as well as professional documentation of wars and crises, much remains invisible. And regimes go to great lengths to hide the bodies, the prisoners, the crimes, and the corruption: still, even now, someone may care.

The Sontag who began her public career with an essay she entitled "Against Interpretation" was herself a celebrant of the indeterminate. In opening that essay, she wrote, “The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magi
cal...." Later in the essay, she adds, "Today is such a time, when the project of interpretation is largely reactive, stifling. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish." And of course she then went on to a life of interpretation that, in its great moments, joined Woolf in resisting the pigeonholes, the oversimplifications and easy conclusions.

I argued with Sontag as she argues with Woolf. In fact, the first time I met her I argued with her about darkness and, to my astonishment, did not lose. If you go to her last, posthumous essay collection, At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches, you will find a small paragraph of my ideas and examples interpolated in her essay, like a burr in her sock. Sontag was writing her keynote speech for the Oscar Romero Award in the spring of 2003, just as the Iraq War broke out. (The award went to Ishai Menuchin, chairman of the committee of selective refusal of military service in Israel.)

Sontag had been about nine when Woolf died. I visited her when she was seventy, in her top-floor apartment in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, with a view of the backside of a gargoyle out the window and a pile of printed-out fragments of the speech on the table. I read them while drinking a dank dandelion-root tea I suspect she'd had in her cupboard for decades, the only alternative to espresso in that kitchen. She was making the case that we should resist on principle, even though it might be futile. I had just begun trying to make the case for hope in writing, and I argued that you don't know if your actions are futile; that you don't have the memory of the future; that the future is indeed dark, which is the best thing it could be; and that, in the end, we always act in the dark. The effects of your actions may unfold in ways you cannot foresee or even imagine. They may unfold long after your death. That is when the words of so many writers often resonate most.

Here we are, after all, revisiting the words of a woman who died three quarters of a century ago and yet is still alive in some sense in so many imaginations, part of the conversation, an influence with agency. In Sontag's resistance speech published at TomDispatch that spring 2003 and in At the Same Time a few years later, you can see a paragraph in which Sontag refers to Thoreau's posthumous influence and to the Nevada Test Site (the place where more than a thousand nuclear bombs were detonated, and where for several years, starting in 1988, I joined the great civil-disobedience actions against the nuclear arms race). The same example ended up in Hope in the Dark: it was about how we antinuclear activists did not exactly shut down the Nevada Test Site, our most overt goal, but inspired the people of Kazakhstan to shut down the Soviet Test Site in 1990. Totally unforeseen, totally unforeseeable.

I learned so much from the Test Site and the other places I wrote about in my book Savage Dreams: The Landscape Wars of the
American West, about the long arc of history, about unintended consequences, delayed impacts. The Test Site as a place of great convergence and collision—and the example of authors like Sontag and Woolf—taught me to write. And then, years later, Sontag leavened her argument about acting on principle with my examples from that kitchen conversation and some details I wrote down. It was a small impact I could have never imagined, and it took place in a year when we were both invoking Virginia Woolf. The principles we both subscribed to in the books that cited her could be called Woolfian.

TWO WINTER WALKS

To me, the grounds for hope are simply that we don’t know what will happen next, and that the unlikely and the unimaginable transpire quite regularly. And that the unofficial history of the world shows that dedicated individuals and popular movements can shape history and have, though how and when we might win and how long it takes is not predictable.

Despair is a form of certainty, certainty that the future will be a lot like the present or will decline from it; despair is a confident memory of the future, in Gonzalez’s resonant phrase. Optimism is similarly confident about what will happen. Both are grounds for not acting. Hope can be the knowledge that we don’t have that memory and that reality doesn’t necessarily match our plans; hope like creative ability can come from what the Romantic poet John Keats called Negative Capability.

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They may unfold long after your death.

That is when the words of so many writers often resonate most.

On a midwinter’s night in 1817, a little over a century before Woolf’s journal entry on darkness, the poet John Keats walked home talking with some friends and as he wrote in a celebrated letter describing that walk, “several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature.... I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”
Keats walking and talking and having several things dovetail in his mind suggests the way wandering on foot can lead to the wandering of imagination and to an understanding that is creation itself, the activity that makes introspection an outdoor pursuit. In her memoir "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf wrote, "Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, To the Lighthouse, in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion."

Some portion of Woolf's genius, it seems to me, is that having no notion, that negative capability. I once heard about a botanist in Hawaii with a knack for finding new species by getting lost in the jungle, by going beyond what he knew and how he knew, by letting experience be larger than his knowledge, by choosing reality rather than the plan. Woolf not only utilized but celebrated the unpredictable meander, on mind and foot. Her great essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure," from 1930, has the light breezy tone of many of her early essays, and yet voyages deep into the dark.

It takes a fictionalized or invented excursion to buy a pencil in the winter dusk of London as an excuse to explore darkness, wandering, invention, the annihilation of identity, the enormous adventure that transpires in the mind while the body travels a quotidian course. "The evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow," she writes. "We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room." Here she describes a form of society that doesn't enforce identity but liberates it, the society of strangers, the republic of the streets, the experience of being anonymous and free that big cities invented.

Introspection is often portrayed as an indoor, solitary thing, the monk in his cell, the writer at her desk. Woolf disagrees, saying of the home, "For there we sit surrounded by objects which enforce the memories of our own experience." She describes the objects and then states, "But when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central pearl of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. How beautiful a street is in winter!"

The essay found its way into my history of walking, Wanderlust, that is also a history of wandering and of the mind in motion: The shell of home is a prison of sorts, as much as a protection.
casing of familiarity and continuity that can vanish outside. Walking the streets can be a form of social engagement, even of political action when we walk in concert, as we do in uprisings, demonstrations, and revolutions, but it can also be a means of inducing reverie, subjectivity, and imagination, a sort of duet between the prompts and interrupts of the outer world and the flow of images and desires (and fears) within. At times, thinking is an outdoor activity, and a physical one.

In these circumstances, it is often mild distraction that moves the imagination forward, not uninterrupted concentration. Thinking then works by indirection, sauntering in a roundabout way to places it cannot reach directly. In "Street Haunting," the voyages of imagination may be purely recreational, but such meandering allowed Woolf to conceive the form of To the Lighthouse, had furthered her creative work in a way that sitting at a desk might not. The ways creative work gets done are always unpredictable, demanding room to roam, refusing schedules and systems. They cannot be reduced to replicable formulas.

Public space, urban space, which serves at other times the purposes of the citizen, the member of society establishing contact with other members, is here the space in which to disappear from the bonds and binds of individual identity. Woolf is celebrating getting lost, not literally lost as in not knowing how to find your way, but lost as in open to the unknown, and the way that physical space can provide psychic space. She writes about daydreaming, or perhaps evening dreaming in this case, the business of imagining yourself in another place, as another person.

In "Street Haunting," she wonders about identity itself:

Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah howling with scepticism and solitude.

But he is all these others, she says, and the strictures limiting what he can be are not her strictures.

PRINCIPLES OF UNCERTAINTY

Woolf is calling for a more introspective version of the poet Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes," a more diaphanous version of the poet Arthur Rimbaud's "I is another." She is calling for circumstances that do not compel the unity of identity that is a limitation or even repression. It's often noted that she does this for her characters in her novels, less often that, in
her essays, she exemplifies it in the investigative, critical voice that celebrates and expands, and demands it in her insistence on multiplicity, on irreducibility, and maybe on mystery, if mystery is the capacity of something to keep becoming, to go beyond, to be uncircumscribable, to contain more.

Woolf's essays are often both manifestoes about and examples of investigations of this unconfined consciousness, this uncertainty principle. They are also models of a counter-criticism, for we often think the purpose of criticism is to nail things down. During my years as an art critic, I used to joke that museums love artists the way that taxidermists love deer, and something of that desire to secure, to stabilize, to render certain and definite the open-ended, nebulous, and adventurous work of artists is present in many who work in that confinement sometimes called the art world.

A similar kind of aggression against the slipperiness of the work and the ambiguities of the artist's intent and meaning often exists in literary criticism and academic scholarship, a desire to make certain what is uncertain, to know what is unknowable, to turn the flight across the sky into the roost upon the plate, to classify and contain. What escapes categorization can escape detection altogether.

There is a kind of counter-criticism that seeks to expand the work of art, by connecting it, opening up its meanings, inviting in the possibilities. A great work of criticism can liberate a work of art, to be seen fully, to remain alive, to engage in a conversation that will not ever end but will instead keep feeding the imagination. Not against interpretation, but against confinement, against the killing of the spirit. Such criticism is itself great art.

This is a kind of criticism that does not pit the critic against the text, does not seek authority. It seeks instead to travel with the work and its ideas, to invite it to blossom and invite others into a conversation that might have previously seemed impenetrable, to draw out relationships that might have been unseen and open doors that might have been locked. This is a kind of criticism that respects the essential mystery of a work of art, which is in part its beauty and its pleasure, both of which are irreducible and subjective. The worst criticism seeks to have the last word and leave the rest of us in silence; the best opens up an exchange that need never end.

**LIBERATIONS**

Woolf liberates the text, the imagination, the fictional character, and then demands that liberty for ourselves, most particularly for women. This gets to the crux of the Woolf that has been most exemplary for me: she is always celebrating a liberation that is not official, institutional, rational, but a matter of going beyond the familiar, the safe, the known into the
broader world. Her demands for liberation for women were not merely so that they could do some of the institutional things men did (and women now do, too), but to have full freedom to roam, geographically and imaginatively.

She recognizes that this requires various practical forms of freedom and power—recognizes it in *A Room of One's Own*, too often remembered as an argument for rooms and incomes, though it demands also universities and a whole world via the wonderful, miserable tale of Judith Shakespeare, the playwright's doomed sister: "She could get no training in her craft. Could she even get her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight?" Dinner in taverns, streets at midnight, the freedom of the city are crucial elements of freedom, not to define an identity but to lose it. Perhaps the protagonist of her novel *Orlando*, who lives for centuries, slipping from one gender to another, embodies her ideal of absolute freedom to roam, in consciousness, identity, romance, and place.

The question of liberation appears another way in her talk "Professions for Women," which describes with delightful ferocity the business of killing the Angel in the House, the ideal woman who meets all others' needs and expectations and not her own.

I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense... Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of

a woman writer. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object—a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is "herself"? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know.

By now you've noticed that Woolf says "I don't know" quite a lot. "Killing the Angel of the House," she says further on, "I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful—and yet they are very difficult to define." This is Woolf's wonderful tone of gracious noncompliance, and to say that her truth must be bodily is itself radical to the point of being almost unimaginable before she had said it. Embodiment appears in her work much more decorously than in, say, Joyce's, but it appears—and though she looks at ways that power may be gained, it is Woolfian that in her essay "On Being Ill" she finds that even the powerlessness of illness can be liberatory for noticing what healthy people do not, for reading texts with a fresh eye, for being transformed. All Woolf's work as I know it constitutes a sort of Ovidian metamorphosis where the freedom sought is the freedom to continue becoming, exploring, wandering, going be-
yond. She is an escape artist.

In calling for some specific social changes, Woolf is herself a revolutionary. (And of course she had the flaws and blind spots of her class and place and time, which she saw beyond in some ways but not in all. We also have those blind spots later generations may or may not condemn us for.) But her ideal is of a liberation that must also be internal, emotional, intellectual.

My own task these past twenty years or so of living by words has been to try to find or make a language to describe the sub-

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tleties, the incalculables, the pleasures and meanings—impossible to categorize—at the heart of things. My friend Chip Ward speaks of “the tyranny of the quantifiable,” of the way what can

be measured almost always takes precedence over what cannot: private profit over public good; speed and efficiency over enjoyment and quality; the utilitarian over the mysteries and meanings that are of greater use to our survival and to more than our survival, to lives that have some purpose and value that survive beyond us to make a civilization worth having.

The tyranny of the quantifiable is partly the failure of language and discourse to describe more complex, subtle, and fluid phenomena, as well as the failure of those who shape opinions and make decisions to understand and value these slipperier things. It is difficult, sometimes even impossible, to value what cannot be named or described, and so the task of naming and describing is an essential one in any revolt against the status quo of capitalism and consumerism. Ultimately the destruction of the Earth is due in part, perhaps in large part, to a failure of the imagination or to its eclipse by systems of accounting that can’t count what matters. The revolt against this destruction is a revolt of the imagination, in favor of subtleties, of pleasures money can’t buy and corporations can’t command, of being producers rather than consumers of meaning, of the slow, the meandering, the digressive, the exploratory, the numinous, the uncertain.

I want to end with a passage from Woolf that my friend the painter May Stevens sent me after writing it across the text of one of her paintings, a passage that found its way into A Field Guide to Getting Lost: ‘In May’s paintings, Woolf’s long sentences
are written so that they flow like water, become an elemental force on which we are all swept along and buoyed up. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. . . . Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless.

Woolf gave us limitlessness, impossible to grasp, urgent to embrace, as fluid as water, as endless as desire, a compass by which to get lost.