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APPLAUSE
NATHAN JANDL

The applause began respectfully. Arundhati Roy—magnetic, direct, and devastating—read from her early masterpiece, *The God of Small Things*: “Everything smelled of recent rain. The thin priest was asleep on a mat on the raised stone verandah. A brass platter of coins lay near his pillow like a comic-strip illustration of his dreams. The compound was littered with moons, one in each mud puddle.” When she finished a few pages later, though everyone knew she was about to read excerpts from her other work, the four hundred assembled in the gold-and-white room began to clap. The sound increased rapidly. There was the faintest sense of delirium—nothing untoward, nothing even really developed, but a joyfulness cut with astonishment at how quickly and densely Roy brought us into the heart of her imaginative world. We’d tasted something entrancing, a complex of colors, scents, sounds, and mood that metonymized us into eager ears, or open mouths, or both. It was the synesthesia of rapture. We clapped our gratitude.

As the night continued, Roy wove an improvised political commentary on the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq with excerpts from her vivid nonfictional writing. Every once in a while, she would say something that triggered a burst of laughter—describing the current age as “psychotic,” or recounting the time that her child contact for a militant Maoist group ate the bananas that were supposed to secretly identify him. But then Roy would say something decisive, arresting, and as though instinctively, a few people would start clapping and much of the audience would join in. The astounding violence of empire compounded by its maddening capacity for amnesia. The vicious youthfulness of America “installing democracy” in ancient countries across the world and leaving behind the creeping toxin of multinational corporations. People nodded vigorously, engulfing the material with knowing acceptance. This was nothing new. This was the truth, coming from someone who knew it, told to people who felt their worst fears and greatest convictions confirmed.

Like the others, I was immersed, clapping along with greater freeness as the room became accustomed to its own predilections. Yet after an hour or so, as the brittleness of my plastic chair asserted itself more insistently and my mind began to overfill with Roy’s words, I let my gaze travel over the crowd—us, me, sitting here, being filled with terrible facts. The disturbing thought arose: how many people had Roy rhetorically killed? Her statistics were compounding: over a hundred thousand in Iraq, tens of thousands in India, then there was Iran, Chile,

Pakistan...We must have hit a million. Outside lay Madison, Wisconsin, eighteen degrees on a March evening. A liberal bastion in a sharply divided state, run by a right-wing governor who entered the capitol building through an underground tunnel to avoid being heckled. Inside, four hundred people sat in a curved line of chairs in the Memorial Union, facing the stage from which Roy magnificently read and spoke of experiences that few of us could have known first-hand. And people clapped. I clapped. But at each successive moment of applause, the feeling became more complicated—should we be clapping? For whom were we appreciative?

The Q&A session got underway, and people began to filter out, small groups breaking off and heading home. The questioners, many of whom were young Indians or Indian-American, asked about Roy's strength, her ability to persevere, her success. She answered, mostly direct but occasionally evasive (skirting the issue of the Booker Prize)—but when she said something particularly cutting or moving, people decided to clap again. I couldn't recall whether this was normal for Q&A's. At this point, it was normal for us. The bearded, 40-something man two seats down from me broke again into rapid-fire *clapclapclapclap* after one of Roy's devastating phrases. It was then that I realized I was getting irritated, and somewhat embarrassed, and I couldn't quite figure out why.

* * *

Two years earlier, Scott Kevin Walker, an Eagle Scout and almost-college-educated man with a slack face and masterful political demeanor, declared the liberation of Wisconsin's "working families." "Wisconsin is open for business," he shouted at rallies—a sentiment balanced by the equally aphoristic catchiness of his other favorite line, which he would deliver more somberly: "Wisconsin is broke." Walker's ascendancy was a hard slap to liberals, who had gotten used to the idea of their traditional swing-state going from a diseased reddish-blue to a far healthier shade of bluish-red. Madisonians, deprived of their brief taste of solidarity with the larger populace, were profoundly pissed. Wisconsin was back in scarlet fever territory, social programs were on the chopping block, and—according to the left-leaning portion of Wisconsin's working families—Walker was going to demolish the collective bargaining rights that regional unions had worked hard to win.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Teaching Assistant Association (TAA)—the graduate student union and a "progressive voice in the university community" since its inception in 1966—was the first to stage a sizeable public freak-out. Building on an impressive history of agitation against legislators and UW administrators who deemed graduate student labor a mere component of "fulfilling degree requirements" (and thus sought to deny TAs compensation, tuition remission, and/or healthcare), the TAA launched a Valentines Day march to the capitol. The signs and Facebook profile images for the rally read, "I ♥ UW, Governor Walker Don't Break My ♥" The TAA had already held several feverish

meetings, with departmental representatives warning us in the English building one day that Walker's policies could quite easily eviscerate our ability to maintain our current (and still nationally uncompetitive) levels of compensation and benefits. No one *really* understood what might happen; even the TAA was openly unclear, since Walker was rushing the bill to avoid time-wasting backtalk from the Democrats. Information was extremely sketchy. What we knew was that Walker wasn't messing around, and it was time to act.

A few hundred people, including some professors whom I knew well, gathered outside the same Union where Arundhati Roy would read two years later. We weren't nervous at all; the morning was cold but sunny and the turnout was a pleasant surprise. Marching up State Street, our numbers stringing into a long but coherent line, we were incited into chants by a friend of mine in the English department. I had known Kat to be interested in "radical Marxism" and the like, but hadn't ever seen her in a position of political leadership like this. The chants felt mildly dorky, things like: "Hey hey! Ho Ho! Scott Walker has got to go!" and "What's disgusting? Union busting!" Why the silly rhyme words? I looked to people passing for reactions but they seemed more bemused than amused, and it became easier to be buoyed by the mass before and behind me.

Eventually we reached the capitol—the gorgeous, Washington-scale replica made of stone from as near as Waupaca, Wisconsin and as far as Greece—and halted outside the northwest doors. One of the TAA leaders, a grad student named Chris with shoulder-length, walnut hair, took the bullhorn and spoke some words of commemoration. There was lots of cheering. Then Chris quieted us down and told us how we would proceed: we would march into the capitol rotunda, and be respectful, and show our love for the UW and our love for democracy, and remember what this meant for our ability to collectively bargain, and then you know what we were going to do?

"We're going to KILL THIS BILL!" he yelled. The crowd cheered back.

Immediately everyone picked up the phrase, yelling it over and over—*Kill the bill! Kill the bill! Kill the bill!* Joining in, I felt both queasy and weirdly at the point of laughter. We were highly intelligent grad students and professors, right?—at a Valentine's Day rally? About love? And collective bargaining?—screaming "KILL this bill"? I looked around me, seeking some sense of confirmation in the faces nearby. A couple of close friends gave me dubious looks, but I couldn't tell what they meant. I decided I'd try to relax.

Chris got our attention again, and we quieted down. This was it. It was time to go inside. He asked whether we were ready and we cheered again. Then we slowly moved forward through the wooden double doors into the dim, fluorescent light of the hallway. I crossed the wide threshold, my eyes adjusting, and saw a long, dense column of heads leading to the rotunda. We were all shoulder-to-shoulder in the marble hall, no more a loose collection of bodies. We had become fused, a single chaotic voice that resonated through these strange halls of government.

As we reached the rotunda, a new chant began. The TAA leaders hadn't used

it until then, and I'd never heard it before. In the weeks that followed, it would become so repeated as to become cloying, even obnoxious. Cars would honk its rhythm; everyone knew the sound. It would join the pantheon of other chants, like the sing-songy "Re-call Wal-ker" howled by random, disheveled men standing with signs long after the main protests ended. The silly union-busting rhyme. The tone-deaf "Kill the bill." But as the TAA brought it out now, for the first time, at the first rally, a huge, addictive, chest-filling energy took hold of the space. We packed ourselves into the rotunda, and threw our heads back to look up at the frescos high above us in the domed ceiling, and imagined the governor behind one of the doors trying to ignore us, and imagined all the other congresspeople in their offices wondering what the hell the noise was about.

The man with the bullhorn yelled: "Tell me what democracy looks like!"

We roared back: "This is what democracy looks like!"

All at once I was imperviously glad to be there. We were like an organism with three hundred beating hearts. Screw Scott Walker, that smug, insulated sonofabitch. We were here, and we were going to win.

* * *

That evening, my girlfriend and I joined some friends for a potluck. Wine, beer, and Valentine's-themed baked goods were the featured cuisine, so Chloe came over before the party and we baked sugar cookies with lewd decorations made from piped frosting and glittery sprinkles. Chloe posted a photo of our favorites to Facebook and we took off for the party.

When we got home, I logged onto Facebook again and saw that Kat had left a comment. Kat was usually playful and ironic, but tonight there was an edge.

Really guys, cookies? she wrote. *This is how you fight Scott Walker? I'm going to need to see a little less sugar and a little more spice.*

I read it several times. I felt a twinge in my gut, the place where I always feel disruptive, inconvenient emotions.

"Did you see what Kat wrote on the photo?" Chloe called from the next room, where she had opened her computer too. "Is she serious?"

"Yeah, I saw it," I said. I looked at it again. The combination of the ridiculous pun and the stern tone kept jarring me. *A little more spice?* As much as I tried to dismiss it, I knew Kat wasn't kidding. But hadn't I been at the rally today? What did they expect us to be doing on a Tuesday night?

I repeated my thoughts out loud, with more emotion than I expected. "What the hell are we supposed to do? Get into our union bunkers and 'fight' 24-7? It's cookies on Valentines Day!"

"I know, I'm actually kind of offended," Chloe said, walking into the living room. "It's fine if you want to dedicate yourself to your cause, but it's not OK to criticize us for spending time together."

Were we overreacting? A couple of bougie kids unwilling to be bothered by

the pressing realities outside our door? It was hard to tell, even after a few days passed. Kat had thrown a sharp little hook of responsibility in us, and already it was pulling tight the tensions between everyday life and the life of the protests.

The TAA, meanwhile, was just beginning its outreach campaign. Even before the full-scale, all-day phone banks were up and running, before the dedicated headquarters staffed with passionate, exhausted volunteers, before the media appearances, the outreach to other union groups like the AFL-CIO, and of course the all-night sleep-ins on the unforgiving marble floors of the capitol, the TAA sent copious emails to their most trusted support system: graduate student members.

At first, the rhetoric of the emails was galvanizing, a shot of deadly-serious energy and information that made perfectly clear just how serious this situation was. The red TAA emblem across the top, the emphatic use of italics, the still slightly alien sign-off: “In Solidarity...” Though I’d been a member of the TAA since I’d matriculated at UW-Madison—it was required, at least until Walker’s bill eliminated such requirements and thus decimated union membership—I’d hardly thought of myself as *part* of them. “Solidarity”: a weighty, somewhat regal term. Sure, I guess I was in solidarity.

And it did come together for me, eventually. It began with the fire fighters and the police force, marching around the capitol even though they’d been exempt from Walker’s law. The giant, gleaming Teamster’s truck. The vast contingents of nurses and high school teachers, taking time off or simply leaving work to join. But especially, a couple of weeks in, the protestors who defied the new decree that they could no longer sleep on the hard floors of the capitol, and so slept on the even colder stone outside. Receiving the news on Facebook at around midnight, long after I’d already come home from a late-afternoon rally, I knew I had to see them in person. I grabbed my camera, bundled up, and drove to the capitol, breezing through the blinking stoplights. The scene was both bizarre and wonderful: huge, nest-like bundles of blankets and sleeping bags with inexplicably cheerful faces peeping out, braving February in Wisconsin. I recognized a few people, but no close friends. It was a comparatively tiny gathering. The air was full with the quiet murmur of voices and the intense attachment we all felt to that place, that building, which had just been torn away from us. These people on the ground wouldn’t leave, not even now, and I felt nothing but affection for them.

And then, after an hour or two, I replaced my lens cap and walked back to my car. I felt self-conscious about leaving (I owned a sleeping bag too, after all), but somehow, I wasn’t wracked with indecision. There was no one to explain to; there was only the next morning to think about—the next rally, when we would relieve the sleepers in force. I knew I’d be back.

* * *

As the dreaded vote drew near, though, and the possibility of success remained persistently uncertain, the intense emotions whirling around the capitol reached

their peak. Solidarity seemed compulsory, and the TAA's emails began to feel more shrill. Their style of address was both impersonal and deeply, personally pressuring. Having a "normal life" outside of the protests—even if that life was precisely the life we were defending, and even if it was in fact overflowing with responsibilities and commitments—seemed a luxury, a pacifist dodge. An email in the early days pulled no punches in rhetoric or font size: "YOUR TUITION REMISSION, HEALTH CARE, WAGES, AND UNION ARE ALL UNDER ATTACK. IT IS URGENT AND IMPERATIVE THAT YOU GET ACTIVE AND INVOLVED IN THE TAA NOW."

It was all in terms of what *you need to do*, like the message titled "Four Things You Need to Do For Us to Win." I see now that they wanted us to own the protest, to make it a form of self-preservation. It didn't matter that we had already been told how urgent this was. It didn't matter what we were doing already. There was still the "you need," the hand reaching out of the guts of the computer to shake you by the collar.

A few of my friends, like Kat, were now higher-ups in the TAA, volunteering inhuman quantities of time to organize canvassing efforts, keep tabs on media coverage, coordinate the epic sessions of public testimony, and field daily crises as the legislature made this or that decision. I discovered that once friends became part of the TAA machine, their communications changed. One night, weeks into the protests, I received a text from Genevieve, a friend who'd attached herself to the TAA as things got crazy. As I read the message, I realized that there was no distinguishing her text from the TAA emails—no personal sentiments or colloquial aura. *We need people at the capitol IMMEDIATELY*, she wrote. *It is imperative that we show solidarity tonight. Drop whatever you're doing and get here NOW.*

As an English grad student being contacted by another English grad student—high guardians of rhetorical awareness!—the shift in her tone felt...dense. Totally un-self-aware. I had trusted the urgency until now; I had internalized as much as I could bear. But this was too much. The situation, that night, at that moment, didn't square with the earth-shaking implications the TAA was affixing to it. I felt like firing a text back: *GENEVIEVE I KNOW YOU. Stop talking to me like I'm your DUMBASS MINION. Also please desist with the ALL CAPS because they are fucking ANNOYING.*

But I never did. Maybe it was because I was floored by how much effort the most committed people were putting in. My own involvement, however consistent, seemed half-assed in comparison. And really, how did I know they were overstating the situation? It was impossible to tell whether we were "winning." It truly felt that we had the barest grasp on our goals, and if we let our dug-in fingernails slip just a tiny bit, all might be lost. At the rallies, speakers of escalating fame compared our struggle to civil rights campaigns, even agitations against dictators like Mubarak. One sign carried by a man in his 50s made the stunning and fantastically inappropriate comparison of Walker to Adolf Hitler. Intellectual subtlety, clever humor, and overblown anger vied for rhetorical space, and the re-

sults were often deeply at odds and deeply confusing. We weren't leaderless—that dubious charge aimed at the Occupy Wall Street movement which would spring up later, arguably emboldened and enabled by what happened in Wisconsin—but we weren't all saying the same thing either.

The governor, meanwhile, had no such issues. To reporters asking about his fiscal strategy: "Wisconsin is open for business." To reporters asking about the cuts: "Wisconsin is broke." Consummate politician, he knew the power of repetition. "I'm just going to focus on what I set out to do and try to fix the economy here in Wisconsin." Against our clashing, barbaric yawps for freedom and the right to bargain for our benefits, Walker's reply remained obstinately, earnestly practical.

And yet we were the ones with messages coming in from Egypt, in solidarity. Our story was picked up by media outlets from all over the world. As the rallies grew, first to ten or fifteen thousand, then to seventy, eighty, one-hundred thousand people, the protest became ever more deeply inspiring. The sense of political engagement was like nothing I'd ever seen or experienced. Maybe it wasn't the 1960s, but no one could tell us we were a small movement—not even Governor Walker, who kept trying to shrug off the masses outside his window. We had weight now, and we knew how to throw it around. Something, we felt, was going to crack.

* * *

Scott Walker's plainspoken consistency—or his disregard for reasonable demands, depending on who you asked—eventually won the day. The bill limiting collective bargaining was passed, despite the best efforts of the Democratic senators, who went as far as to abscond from the state to defeat a quorum.

A few months later, I was in Chicago with family, where I had a conversation with one of my conservative uncles. It was friendly and open, but I was having a hard time giving him a clean narrative about the demonstrations and their aftermath. As he probed for more details, I confessed that I had kind of lost track of exactly how the whole complicated ordeal concluded. He let out a faintly triumphant snort.

"After all that, you don't even know what happened?"

"I mean, I do," I protested. "We basically lost. I've just forgotten some of the specifics." I felt ridiculous.

Immediately after Walker prevailed with his new legislation, the protest fully converted into "recall Walker" mode, a process that had already begun during the collective bargaining wrangle. Though the capitol itself was no longer packed with people, a divisive energy kept the state's political nerves twanging in ceaseless tension. In Madison, entire streets were lined with "Recall Walker" posters of various persuasions. These speckled the rest of the state too—but so did their opposites, the "I Stand With Walker" posters perched conspicuously in cornfields, front lawns, on the sides of barns. Some were nearly the size of billboards.

When the big day came, massive numbers showed up at the polls. Winter's first snow was in the air; the day felt auspicious. But we—the TAA, the unions, the bluecoats in Wisconsin—lost again. Exit polls following the failed recall effort indicated that a majority of Wisconsinites were uncomfortable with the idea of a recall without actual criminal charges to motivate it. There was the noticeable hint of disdain: Walker entered office with a majority vote, however slim; why should people be able to vote him out again simply because he was actively doing what he plainly said he would do?

* * *

Now, two years later, Scott Walker is simply a fixture in that big white building at the center of town. I've only been inside the capitol once or twice since the protests, and each time a brief sensation hits me—a complex slurry of fondness, pride, mournful anger. I think of Walker sitting in his office, happy in his success over us union “thugs”—if he even thinks about it any more. Bad job numbers notwithstanding, he has bigger fish to fry. There's business to bring to the state. There's mining legislation to be shoved over the heads of the Native tribes. There may even be a Presidential run in the offing.

Meanwhile, my contract with the university is—however precarious—still intact and functioning. My co-pays have gone up: the robust state healthcare offsetting our meager TA salaries feels a little less plush. But, so far, it's still there. The English department building is every bit as shabby and asbestos-ridden, and given Walker's recent move of cutting millions from the UW's budget, this is unlikely to change.

The TAA, dealt a serious defeat but undaunted as ever, has lost a large portion of membership. They're still working to get it back. I'm not actually sure I'm on the rolls right now—the annual fee rose, and it's hard to pull the trigger on such things when you're making a little over \$1,000 per month. I feel quite embarrassed about that fact, but for some reason, I haven't found the motivation to give them my bank information again.

* * *

As we leave Arundhati Roy's reading, the capitol building glows in the darkness at the far end of State Street. It's another waning winter season, and Roy's masterful language has conjured forth the progressive heart of Madison. It happened so easily. She read from her work, she described what she had seen. She summoned the impatient energy of political need—the need to confront our country's magnetic attraction to violence and injustice and poisonous economic logic. For those two hours, we listened, still removed from the space of requirement. Protected and prostrate, we could embrace our own dark complicities. The more her words took hold of the room, the more we held our wrists out for her to gently slash, which she did without touching us, without moving a muscle. She simply spoke and the

incisions were made.

How long will the wounds last? What will we do to staunch them once their pain becomes too much? Or were we already healed in simply having come—in bringing our bodies to that place, in generating an incessancy of applause?

At home, a new email from the TAA: a general membership meeting; elections for new co-presidents. I delete it, then go to my trash, and bring it back. I'll let it linger for a while, marked "unread," though I know what it says, though I know that soon it'll be lost from view, though I'll delete it again—quickly, easily, but utterly without conviction—once the meeting has passed.