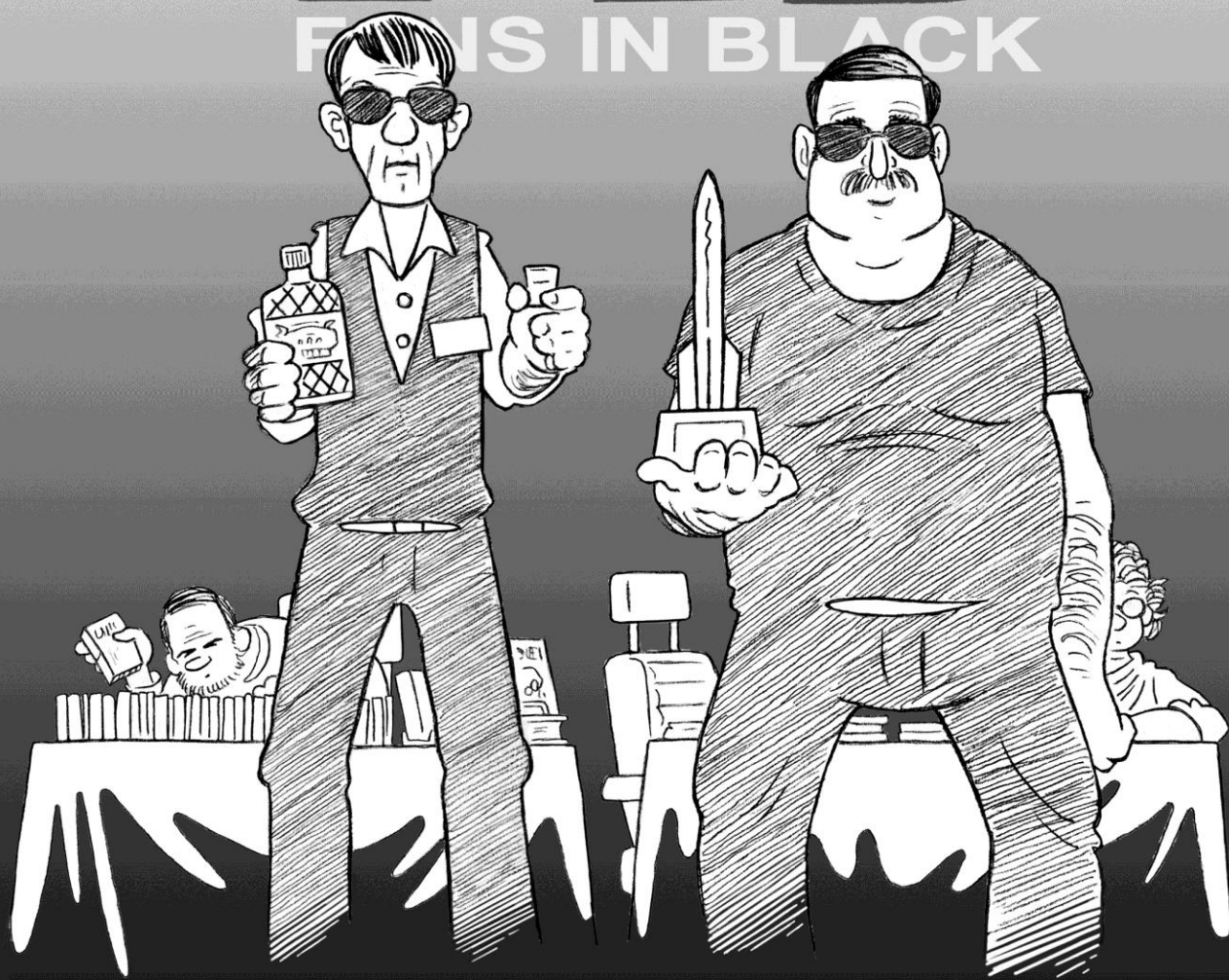


ASKANCE

FIB
FANS IN BLACK



PROTECTING THE CON
FROM THE SCUM OF FANDOM!

TW'13

Edited & published by John Purcell, 3744 Marielene Circle, College Station, TX 77845-3926 USA

Proofreading on this issue is courtesy of our cats Inga, Eyegore, and Froderick. If there are typos anywhere in this issue, these are the responsible parties. Good help is so hard to find these days.

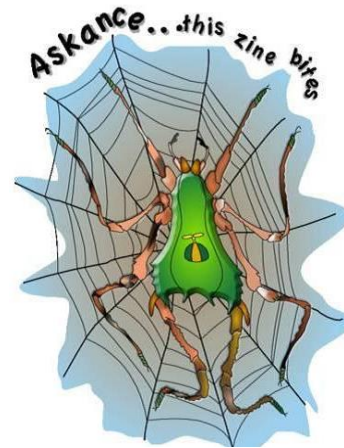
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What you have here in your hands (or on screen) is another Mythical Publication. Copies of this fine, back on a quarterly schedule fanzine can be had for The Usual, which means expressed interest, submission and eventual inclusion of articles and artwork, letters of comment, and cold hard cash in the amount of \$3.00 USD if you want a printed copy mailed to you. Bribes are also accepted. Of course, if you send in locs, articles, and artwork, you just earned a life-time free subscription. Consider yourself lucky, indeed.

Table of Contents

<i>Bemused Natterings</i>	3
<i>Rules of Acquisition</i> , by Taral Wayne.....	6
<i>Gonna Roll Them Bones</i> , by John Purcell.....	9
Book Review: by ye editor	
<i>Bodacious Creed</i> , by Jonathan Fesmire.....	17
<i>Figby</i> , by Bill Fischer.....	19
<i>State of the Fanzines</i>	20
<i>From the Hinterlands</i>	23
<i>Convention Calendar</i>	28
<i>What's Next</i>	37



Taral Wayne writes about the cover:

"It's almost hard to believe that this drawing is about six years old, and it was originally drawn for a fan who wanted to have a special cover for his convention report. Somehow, the con report was never written, however. Other, more immediate concerns kept me from doing, but eventually I stirred myself to ask whether it would be alright if the art was published somewhere else. The fan who originally commissioned gave his blessing ... but, then, I forgot about it again all over again. And again. Part of the problem was that there didn't seem an obvious place where a cover marked all over with "Fans in Black" could obviously be published. Fortunately, John Purcell said he was more than happy to give this *Men In Black* homage the cover space in needed, and with a little Photoshop manipulation it was easily done. This is a tale of procrastination, and failed plans, that are familiar to most fanartists. It would be a redundant to repeat it in this as well as in many other instances. Sadly though, it become grown less common for me to contribute fan art at all, and seeing old work left unused such as this only makes the oversight all the more piquant."

Art Credits

Front cover by Taral Wayne

Sheryl Birkhead – 2; Brad Foster – 3; John Picacio – 4; Julie Gomoll – 5, 20; clip art – 6, 8; Nicked off Internet – 7, 14, 23; Photos by John Purcell – 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21; Jose Sanchez – 22;

Craig Smith – 27; Teddy Harvia – 28, 31, 36.

Back cover – Ditmar

bemused natterings

Out of the fire, into the pan, jump into the oven, turn up the heat...



By now most folks in the scientifictional fanzine multiverse probably know that I am co-chairing the upcoming annual fanzine fan's convention, Corflu, here in College Station, Texas. The dates for this extravaganza are March 13-15, 2020, and it will be held at the Hilton College Station Hotel and Convention Center: all information relating to this event can be found at www.corflu.org. When you go to that website there are multiple links to registering for Corflu 37, booking your room, and other information. The 2020 FAAn Awards ballot is also available there as well, plus all of the Progress Reports that detail all sorts of things about the upcoming convention. It should be a grand gathering of the clan, complete with two – count 'em, two! – Corflu 50 guests, Tommy Ferguson, who is coming all the way from Northern Ireland, and Howard Waldrop, venturing forth from far-flung Austin, Texas. Many other notables in the fannish multiverse will be there as well. Again, go to the Corflu 37 website

and click on the **members** link on the left menu to see who else shall be there. The registration fees for attending memberships increase on January 1, 2020, so act fast and beat the bump. Supporting memberships remain at \$25 USD and £20 GBP for the duration. For my part, I will do my best to get this issue finished and posted as quickly as possible to help get the word out, so do not be surprised if Corflu 37 – a.k.a., Corflu Heatwave – is mentioned more than once in the following pages.

ArmadilloCon 41 Report

Normally I would write up convention reports as a separate article for this fanzine, but due to time constraints – see above nattering – I decided to share some brief thoughts about the 41st edition of ArmadilloCon, held over the weekend of August 2-4, 2019, in that aforementioned far-flung city of Austin, Texas.

This was my second ArmadilloCon – a year ago I attended my first, bringing the 2018 TAFF winner Johan Anglemark along during his TAFF travels across North America – and this time my darling wife Valerie joined the revelry. I warned her ahead of time that ArmadilloCon is a very literary-based science fiction convention, that it is not as faannish a con as we are accustomed to, but is still populated by excellent people. This year a long-time friend of mine, Matthew B. Tepper, would be there promoting the now just completed LosCon 46 in Los Angeles, which he was chairing. It was great fun to see Matthew again, and Valerie and I enjoyed many a wide-ranging conversation with him over the weekend.



I introduced Valerie to many science fiction fans, writers, and artists over that weekend: notable among them are John Pocacio, Dan Tolliver, Scott Cupp, John Gibbon, Joe Lansdale, William Ledbetter, Rie Sheridan Rose, Brad and Cindy Foster, and many others. A very nice surprise was seeing Spike there, and also local writer Howard Waldrop. We also chatted with ArmadilloCon 41 Writer Guest of Honor Rebecca Roanhorse. The con's cast of characters included Dan Tolliver as the Fan GoH, Toastmaster Marshall Ryan Maresca, the Science Guest was Moriba K. Jah (a brilliant young (48 years old is much younger than me!) aerospace engineer), and the Special Guest was Martha Wells, whose *Murderbot* series is now on my Must-Read list; so far I have only read the first book, *All Systems Red*, and thoroughly enjoyed it, and now I want to read the rest of them. (Word up: a stand-alone *Murderbot* novel, *Network Effect*, is due out in May 2020.)

Like I said, most of the panels were focused on SF literature, although we did join John Picacio's demonstration game of Loteria: he was one of the many artists present, and man alive, is his work beautiful! Loteria is a traditional Mexican card game that is very similar to Bingo, but uses picture-story cards – some of which are shown here – instead of numbered balls drawn at random. The

caller of the card drawn usually makes up a story to go along with the card in their hand, while players match the image on their *tabla* (a visual Bingo card, if you will) and cover it with a bean. Like regular Bingo, when a player covers a row across, top-to-bottom, or diagonally, that player cries out “Loteria!” and the images are confirmed. It is a very fun and unique game. If you have a chance, if John is at a convention and giving a demonstration of his Loteria game cards, go and enjoy.

Due to ArmadilloCon's focus on literary science fiction and fantasy, most of the panels dealt with topics such as “Aliens Among Us” (ably moderated by William Ledbetter) and “Crossover SF”, although I question the inclusion of “Godzilla in 2019” on the program, but hey, it's Godzilla, so I'm not complaining. Matthew B. Tepper moderated a retrospective panel on Isaac Asimov on Sunday, and the “SF Pictionary” game was an hour's worth of silliness that proved Brad Foster is not very good at Pictionary. In fact, not being an artist is an advantage at that game.

The hospitality suite was small, but well-stocked with nibbles and drinks both hot and cold. It was never over-crowded, which is perfect for people to sit and converse. On Friday night in the consuite, Melissa Tolliver hosted the first annual “Open Mic Night”: fans were invited to share original stories, poems, tell bad jokes, or sing songs if they so desired. Since I had brought my acoustic guitar, I played two original songs there. Unfortunately, I flubbed up the first line to a stanza on “Progression in Green

Major,” but I did a reset, and started again at that point then finished the song. Oh, well. It was good practice.

All in all, ArmadilloCon 41 was a lot of fun, and Valerie and I plan on returning next year for its 42nd iteration. In the meantime, I need to get more involved with preparing for Corflu 37, which I am chairing, which transpires three months from now.

Am I panicking? Not really. A bit anxious, yes, but I’m not worried too much. I have good people helping me, so I am positive that I can host a small convention that can be as convivial and fun as ArmadilloCon.

Who is in this issue

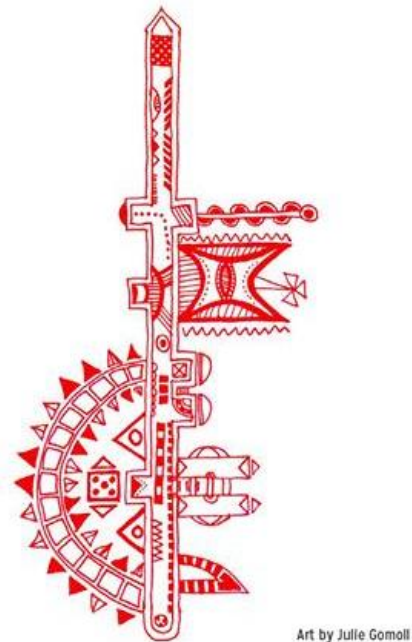
Mostly me, unfortunately, but after last issue’s Steampunk-themed effort, this is actually A Good Thing because it forces me to do two things: (1) finish off the Czechia portion of my 2017 TAFF trip, and (2) write up a book review of *Bodacious Creed* by Jonathan Fesmire, one of last issue’s Steampunk author survey contributors. But two people definitely helped to flesh out this particular issue, both of whom are regular contributors to this not-so-regularly published fanzine.

Bill Fischer

My good friend from long ago college days – and one third of the folk trio I was in during the height of the Disco Craze during the mid-Seventies (I really want him to write something about those days) – Bill is back with another installment of our favorite lab assistant, *Figby*. As you may recall from last issue, Figby and his professorial colleague are off to a conference in Romania, which is where this tale resumes.

Taral Wayne

Not to be outdone, Taral does a two-fer again by supplying a fun cover and another article. He has written extensively about Roman coins and other collectible items in this fanzine before, but this time around Taral shares the tale of another type of collectible near and dear to our hearts: an old fanzine. It is an interesting tale, for sure, and I am thrilled to have it in this issue.



Ignorantia legis neminem excusat.



Rules of Acquisition

Taral Wayne

Although a month has gone by that was rather like the last one, it hasn't been entirely uneventful. It *has* been a lot more like the last month than I liked, however, since it continued to be little more than an endless number of appointments with various doctors and nurses who demanded to poke and probe me, and I think I spent almost one afternoon out of every three with changing dressings, giving blood or being wired for echoes. So unchanging are these inflexible rituals that I'm not going to recount them again this month.

Speaking of which, it was also the time of the year again for another inflexible ritual – the Canadian National Exhibition. It rolled around early in August, as always, and will finish on the last day of summer, when the melancholy drudges who have to return to school will realize, as always, that the best part of the year is finally over. Of course, this is of no consequence to me, since I haven't had to worry about school for well over 45 years. Nonetheless, it was time for the "Ex" once again.

Unlike past years, when I was passed through the gates as "disabled," admittance was no longer free. Still, seniors get in at half price, which isn't too bad a deal.

I'm forced to report that there was even less to see at the Ex than there had been the year before – a trend that I suspect is irreversible and will eventually end in some sort of "privatization" that will convert the CNE to a glorified Wal-Mart, selling sponsored products that anyone could buy at any other "Big Box" store. In the meantime, however, I enjoyed the event as best I could, and did what I had been looking forward to since last year: I bought the incredible home-made fudge, home-made honey and home-made maple syrup, ate a deep-fried Mars bar and had a frugal falafel dinner.

I also found a couple of dealers I knew. I traded one of them some Russian-made military toys in exchange for a large, 18th century Czarist-era five-kopec bronze coin that is about the size of a poker chip. Then I hunted up the other dealer and quickly struck a deal to buy some old Canadian banknotes that were missing from my collection – a \$50 bill from 1937, and a \$100 bill from the 1954 series. They were not actually as expensive as you might think, considering that \$100 in the 1950s was more than a week's wages ... but today might pay for a dinner for two at a medium-priced steak franchise.

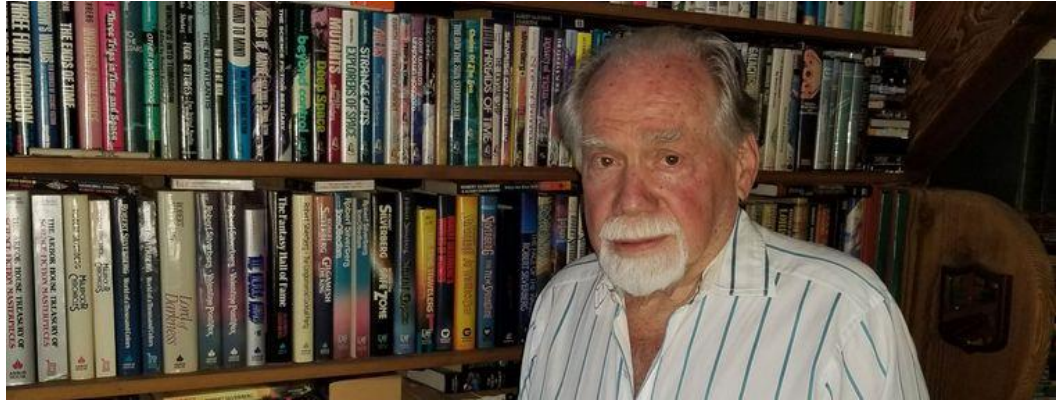
There was little more to do that I haven't already done the previous year, but I soaked in the ambiance for all it was worth, and confess that I enjoyed myself. There would be little point to a detailed report, however.

Derivativa potestas non potest esse major primitiva.

I very nearly sold a thousand-dollar fanzine to Robert Silverberg. The zine was produced by Forrest J. Ackerman, as a record of Robert Heinlein's Guest of Honour speech at the 1941 Worldcon, and only published by mimeograph in a very limited edition of 100.

The demand was insistent, however, so Ackerman re-used the re-stencils to run off a second hundred copies. The main difference is that the first edition used green ink on the cover, and the reprint used black.

In either case, the speech remained a collector's item for at least forty years, so if you wanted to read it, you either had to find a reprint in some obscure 1940s magazine – or possess one of



the original mimeographed copies. The situation remained thus until the 1980s or later, when the speech was finally reprinted in a modern, professional magazine.

It so happened that I had bought an original copy of this speech back in the 1970s ... for \$2.

When last reported, a reputable dealer in New England was offering one for sale at \$1,200 US!

More interesting to me, personally, was that Robert Silverberg announced through his contacts that he was looking for a copy. I was able to contact the writer, and verified that he was interested in acquiring my copy.

While I am not a great fan of Heinlein's, my possession of an original copy of that 1941 speech was a considerable coup, and the source of some pride. But \$1,200 was \$1,200, and I thought the money would console me nicely for its loss. Even at a negotiated lower price, the exchange rate between Canada and the US would still leave me able to clear \$1,000, Canadian.

I wasn't counting on Silverberg apparently not being willing, or perhaps not able, to afford that sort of money. As we exchanged e-mails, it became obvious that he expected we could exchange something of equal value. The problem was that I no longer collected SF novels – nor the professional correspondence that Silverberg also offered. Perhaps an actual first 1940s edition of Isaac Asimov's *Caves of Steel*, or *The End of Eternity*, but hardly anything less would compensate me. Certainly not one of Silverberg's later epic fantasies, such as *Gilgamesh the King* or *Lord Valentine's Castle*. Not even his 1969 novel – *Nightwings*, my favourite – was likely to be worth more than \$50 in the first edition.

With visions of an easy thousand dollars vanishing from my grasp, a delightfully absurd idea popped into my head. After being nominated so many times for my own Hugo, it was not hard to convince myself that in fact, dammit, I *deserved a Hugo!* Fandom has changed so much in the last few years, however, that there is effectively nil chance of winning one now ... all the more so since I am inevitably fading out as a light in the fannish firmament. But here was Robert Silverberg, who had won *four!* Did he really

need so many? It was understandable that the writer cherished his most creative work, and the recognition for it that he rightly deserved in the 1950s and 60s. But really... *Gilgamesh the King*? Could he not spare even a token of one late effusion of his fading genius?

Judging from his response, apparently not. I rather imagine that the reply to my suggestion was written in a rather testy tone of voice.

The last I heard from Silverberg, he was trying to talk a university library into trading some of his personal correspondence for an original copy of the speech. Apparently, he puts a very high value on his correspondence, but unfortunately it is very little more than boring shop talk to me, and so has no appeal. One wonders whether fate has been unkind to Silverberg, and if he actually cannot not afford a twelve-room, Beverly Hills home with a kidney-shaped swimming pool and a large, German luxury sedan, as I had always imagined ... or whether he just could not accept that a poorly-printed old fanzine that was only a few pages long could be worth more than ten or twenty dollars.

It was a disappointing outcome, but I am not in the business of Being a Nice Guy to Famous Science Fiction Writers.

But still, that disappointment has lately been redeemed by another, far more successful deal. For some time, I had been willing to sell most of my furry comics – even sought-after titles like *Usagi*, *Albedo*, *Captain Jack*, *Fusion*, *Bone* and many others. I have not read any of them for, probably, twenty years or more. Nor did I have any great desire to so. So I struck a deal with a furry dealer, who said he would be able to drive to Toronto to buy the stuff from me. It was on his way, so neither postage nor gasoline would be needed to get the comics back to New Jersey. I don't know whether I made any profit on them, but I doubt I could have lost much – and, while, I owned them, I had only the dubious “pleasure” of possession.

I also had the satisfaction of doing better on the transaction with the comics dealer than I would have with Mr. Silverberg...

- Taral Wayne

Guide to Latin Linos in this issue

page 5: Ignorance of the law excuses no one.

page 6: The power derived cannot be greater than that from which it is derived.

page 10: Time reveals all things.

page 14: The usefulness of something is not invalidated by the consequences of its abuse.

Page 16: Suppression of the truth is the suggestion of falsehood.

page 18: Anger is a brief madness.

page 32: An appeal to the ignorance of facts.

Source: *More Latin for the Illiterati*, by Jon R. Stone (1999)

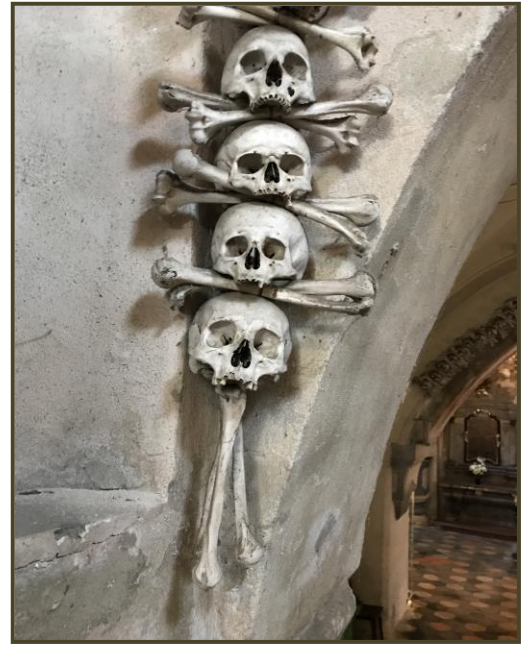


Gonna Roll Them Bones

Still more TAFF 2017 trip reportage

from John Purcell

In our last episode our decrepit heroes, John and Valerie Purcell, spent a week in Helsinki, Finland, doing TAFF Delegate Things at the 75th World Science Fiction Convention (August 9-13, 2017), and preparing for the start of their return back to the wilds of Texas. Before then, though, they had to endure another seven days of travel. Immediately lying before them was Prague, Czechia, which meant another foray into a foreign city with nobody there to hold their hands and show them around. Once again, they were strangers in a strange land...



Late afternoon on Monday, August 14, 2017, Valerie and I were in Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, only this time we were incredibly excited about our next destination: Prague! Going there was a given on my TAFF trip because Valerie's paternal ancestors immigrated to America from Czechoslovakia in the mid-19th century. In fact, this entire trip was a journey through both ancestry lines: I am of English and Irish origin, possibly Norman (my family name goes back to 11th century Normandy as Puirsele), and Valerie's parental lines are Scandinavian and Czech. We kept this in mind when designing the eventual TAFF trip route: first to England, side trip to Wales, then France, Netherlands, Finland (via Riga, Latvia), Czech Republic, then back to England to fly back to Houston, Texas on August 20th. Thus far everything had gone fairly well, considering.

When I say "considering" that means we had to contend with unexpected, shall we say, inconveniences? One must admit that arriving in a strange city – let alone a foreign country – in the dark of night is not the best planning, but sometimes that is just how plane and train schedules work out. So far on our trip we had survived arriving in Paris, France, in late evening, and still made it to our hotel just fine (see "Riding on the Metro" in *Vibrator #46* (November 2017) for that sordid tale). And even though we landed in Riga, Latvia, at sundown, by the time we had made it to our hotel for that overnight 22-hour layover to catch our connecting flight to Helsinki the next day (*viz*, "Piss on It" on www.efanzines.com), we managed to get to our hotel in Riga without too much trouble: we simply had to walk further than usual once we got off the tram that stopped three blocks from the Knights Court Hotel. With our pile of luggage, that's a decent trudge and drag. But we did it. So now our Air Baltic flight from Helsinki was due to land in Prague at 7 PM local time. Still light out. No problem, right?

Yeah. Still a problem.

By the time we left Václav Havel Airport on a train to Vlavni Nadrazi, the main station in the heart of the city, it was starting to get dark, and that's when the fun began. The first thing we had to do was get our bearings and figure where in Prague our accommodations were located. Unlike Paris, Riga, or Helsinki where we had hotels booked, we had rented an apartment for our three-days in Prague for a very low rate; well, by our standards it was low. It was a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen that had a launderette (small clothes washer) built in, full bath, a spacious living room (wide screen television), and windows that let in a lot of daylight. No air conditioning – again – but hot weather wasn't an issue this time. The apartment was in the Zborov part of Prague, less than three blocks from the tram stop we would use to go back and forth into the city center.

Now this is all fine and good, but I will give you, gentle readers, three guesses as to what happened on that darkening evening of August 14, 2017. Your first two guesses don't count, either. I will wait. [*'Jeopardy' theme song plays*] Welcome back. If you said "got lost," then you've been paying attention to the other segments of my TAFF trip report.

Boy, did we! The stupid thing is, at first we were actually going in the right direction on the correct tram line. The GPS on our iPhones worked perfectly. We took a short tram ride from the train station south to a stop at a cross street called Vinohradská, where we disembarked with our luggage to get onto the yellow (or *žlutá*) tram line. So far so good. Unfortunately it was at this exact time that Valerie's cellphone battery crapped out from overuse, and my cellphone battery was very low, too. This affected the directional feature of the GPS, which said we were going **east** instead of **west towards our destination**. I discovered this after a half dozen stops, so we got off at the next stop, crossed the street, and hopped onto the next yellow tram to go back in the opposite direction (i.e., **west**). Please keep in mind we had two good sized suitcases, two carry-on bags, and I'm also wearing a backpack. If we had the Bag of Doom with us – which had been safely transported back to Croydon by the Fishlifters from the Worldcon – we would have been physically traumatized. As it was, this was starting to get old and we were getting frazzled.

Guess what? [*"Jeopardy" theme plays two and a half notes and is cut off with a screech*] We **had** been heading **eastward** toward the Zborov area the first time we boarded the *žlutá* tram line. We discovered this because this time we crossed the Vltava River, which is **west** of our destination. Once again off we clambered with all of our luggage, crossed Vinohradská Avenue yet again, and I found a police officer who actually spoke English who confirmed that we were finally heading in the correct direction: take the *žlutá* tram east on Vinohradská for 3 kilometers and get off at Černická *ulice* (street). So we did. By the time we made it to our apartment (I called ahead (my phone was barely working at this point) to let them know we would soon be there) it was 10:45 PM, which really wasn't that bad (it wasn't our usual after midnight arrival time, thank the stars), but once again we had trudged and dragged our western asses around a foreign city in the dark. This habit we seriously had to break.

Tempus omnia revelat.



The main room of our Prague 2-bedroom apartment.

Thankfully, Prague at night is a beautiful city. Daytime, too. In the morning, we enjoyed the view from our apartment, took pictures with fully recharged cellphones, and I called Liam Proven, whom we were to meet later that day when he finished work. For those who may not know Liam, he is an English sf fan who lives and worked in Brno, Czechia (roughly three hours east of Prague by train), but was moving to Prague for his job. The deal we had made with Liam was that he would have the use of the other bedroom in our rental apartment

during our stay. He had business to attend to in Prague, so this worked out very well for everyone.

The question obviously was not what to do while waiting for Liam, but where to go while waiting for Liam. We figured the best use of our time was to use daylight hours to become better acquainted with our surroundings and using the tram system efficiently. The narrow, cobblestoned street outside our apartment building curved up a steep hill – well, not too steep, but it sure seemed like it to our tired legs – that wound up around 19th and early 20th century buildings, mostly the former, as it climbed up towards Vinohradská Avenue, passing a small park embraced by old streets, where we boarded the *žlutá* tram line. Our destination on this beautiful sunny day was the New Town – actually not really new, since King Charles IV laid it out in 1348 – part of Prague, notable for many museums, and Wenceslas Square, which we had accidentally discovered the previous evening during our confused wanderings. Clearly, it is much easier to navigate in daylight when not dragging all your luggage around. We marveled at the beautiful old buildings, especially the massive National Museum at the north end of the Square, which we sorely wanted to enter but feared we'd get lost inside. We meandered in and out of shops, stopped in for refreshment at the Londoner Pub (one of dozens of internationally themed pubs and restaurants lining Wenceslas Square), and generally soaked in the international vibe of this 670 year old "new" part of Prague. The next day and night

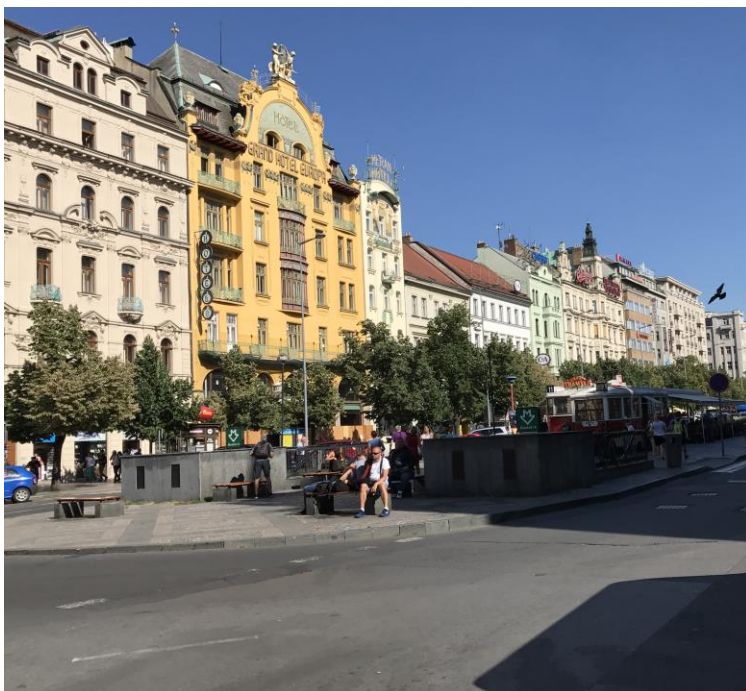


Street outside our apartment building.

we would be exploring Old Town with Liam. For now, though, we stuck with the area immediately surrounding Wenceslas Square so that we would not lose our bearings and return to the apartment without getting lost. Again.

This time we actually managed to not do that! Drawing upon our experiences of using the London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Helsinki mass transit system, we moved around Prague without difficulty. Score one for the traveling Americans. We visited the Alphonse Mucha museum (very affordable and delightful). For readers not familiar with Mucha's work, he was one of the finest artists of the Art Nouveau movement, and Valerie and I have long admired his work. After that, we wandered more, took even more photographs, and simply enjoyed the international urban vibe of New Town Prague.

This city was probably the most visually fascinating part of my travels across Europe. There was so much to see and do, and the architecture is an incredible mixture of old and new, depending upon where in the city you were. And getting around was remarkably easy, once you became accustomed to the maps and directions, and affordable. Very affordable, in fact. A person earning a moderate income in America – let's say, an annual salary of \$45,000 – converts to 996,770 koruna in Czechia, which would place one well up the wealth ladder in Prague. When we reserved our apartment for the three and a half days of our stay, we thought that the 775 Kč per day rate was going to tap out our cash reserves, so imagine our surprise when that translated to a mere \$35 a night in US currency. As a result, we felt rather like the hoity-toity upper class American tourists since we felt that we didn't have to watch our spending as much during our stay in Czechia. So around we wandered, happily taking pictures of the varicolored buildings, all the while marveling at the simple fact that ***we were in fucking Prague!***



Around 1700 hours – that's 5 PM for the American readers here – Liam Proven called, asking for the address of the apartment we were staying at, saying that he would be there in roughly an hour. To shorten this part of the tale, Valerie and I wandered back to a tram that would return us before 1800 hours, even though Liam did not really get there until nearly 1900 hours. He had misjudged how long it would take to travel out to that part of Prague. It didn't matter, anyway, since that gave us more time to straighten up and have a bit of dinner prepared. After enjoying a nice home-away-from-home home-cooked meal, we sat around chatting for a few hours before crawling off to sleep.

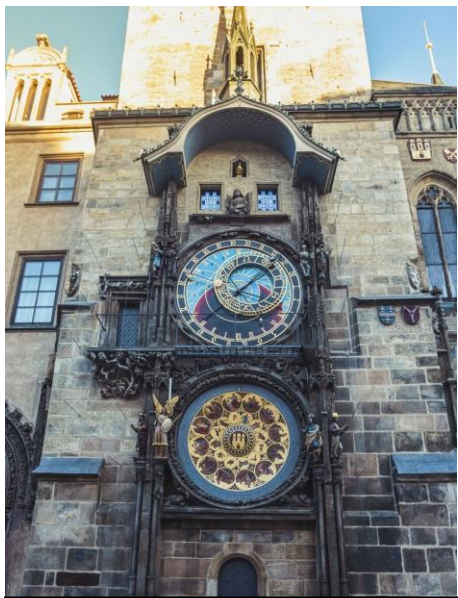
Tomorrow was to be a busy day roaming the streets of Prague. This time, though, we would know where we were going.

The next day – August 16, 2017 – was Valerie’s birthday. We were only spending a total of three and a half days in Czechia and wanted to make the most of it, so with Liam Proven as our local guide – or is that loco? Sometimes I get those two words confused – the three of us planned out an itinerary for the day that focused on Old Town Prague, having dinner there, and then walking across the St. Charles Bridge at sundown. Liam swore on a stack of baklava that that is the best time to take in the beauty of that part of the city. Well, how could we argue? He had been there before, so we succumbed to his personal judgment.

Let it be known that if any of you reading this ever get the chance to go to Prague, Czechia, on vacation, do not hesitate, just do it. Prague, in my estimation, is one of the most photogenic cities I have ever seen. The three of us took the tram down to the New Town area of Prague again, where Liam led us around, pointing out key historical buildings, all the while keeping up a patter worthy of an experienced local guide. Valerie and I took dozens of pictures on our iPhones – most likely duplicating subjects, but we didn’t care; memories for both of us – during our meanderings, and the hours swiftly passed. The architecture here was marvelous, but once Liam took us through the gate into Old Town it was like that scene in *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy steps out into Oz.



Liam Proven, reading a Prague street sign.



Astronomical Clock after renovation.

Our jaws dropped and Valerie and I probably looked like we were trolling for flies, our mouths agape in wonder. It was as if we had immediately stepped through a time portal, shifting the three of us three to four hundred years further into the past. Some of the buildings were indeed that old, probably older. The streets were cobblestoned, worn smooth by centuries of feet and weathering. One of the must-sees of our trip was the Astronomical Clock, but unfortunately it was under a year-long restoration at that time – see what I did there? – so it was covered by scaffolding. No matter. It was still one of the coolest things we had seen during our trip. It is definitely in each of our top ten lists.

Onward we trod through Old Town with Liam leading the way. Occasionally he would get turned around as we found ourselves on the same street a few times, but that was okay; it gave us a chance to see ancient architecture we had missed the first one or two times through. Liam did apologize for these misdirected routes,

explaining that he had only been in Prague a few times before since he had mostly been living in Brno. Oh, well. We forgave him. At one point we took a coffee break at an outdoor café, sitting at a table next to a monument to George Smetana, a great Czech composer of the 1800s. The eventual goal of our walk

was to be on the St. Charles bridge at sunset; Liam – and all the tourist literature – stated that if there was any one single place to be at the right time, that was it. “Trust me,” he said. “It’s magical.” So on we went, wending our way through narrow, winding streets. Eventually we would celebrate Valerie’s birthday that night at a restaurant in Old Town, but first: to the bridge!

The crowds became thicker but not impassable, full of locals and tourists leisurely strolling in the general direction of St. Charles Bridge as the sun descended. Liam timed it out perfectly: the sky was just beginning to darken as the three of us approached the bridge. The atmosphere was festive, and the air was filled with conversation, music, the aroma of food vendors, and history. We walked onto St. Charles Bridge as lights began to turn on all around us, and the statuary lining the bridge was marvelous. Liam pointed across the river. “There it is: Prague Castle,” he said, and let the sight do the rest.



It looked like a fairy castle overlooking the river and city. This was easily in the top three most beautiful sights of the entire trip. We walked the length of the bridge and back again, eventually located that restaurant Valerie had selected for her birthday dinner because it had an extensive gluten free menu. Liam is a vegetarian, so he had no problem finding something to his liking, and I could care less: if it sounded good, looked good, and smelled good, I was going to eat it. It was a delicious dinner all around, and a wonderful way to celebrate Valerie’s birthday in the land of her ancestors.

The next day – August 17th – was scheduled as a day trip out to Kutna Hora, a one hour train ride east of Prague. According to her grandfather’s memoirs, that village in the heartland of Czechia was where *his* grandparents came from when they immigrated to Missouri in the mid-19th century. Our goal was not only to see if we could find evidence of Prochaskas (her maiden name) living in the area, but also to visit the Sedlec Ossuary. Alighting at the station in Kutna Hora, we walked up the main street leading into the village. The day was sunny and warm, and the small homes and establishments lining the streets had