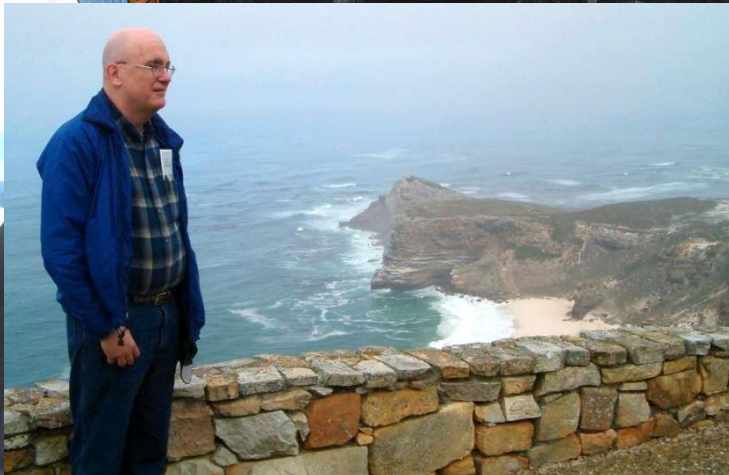
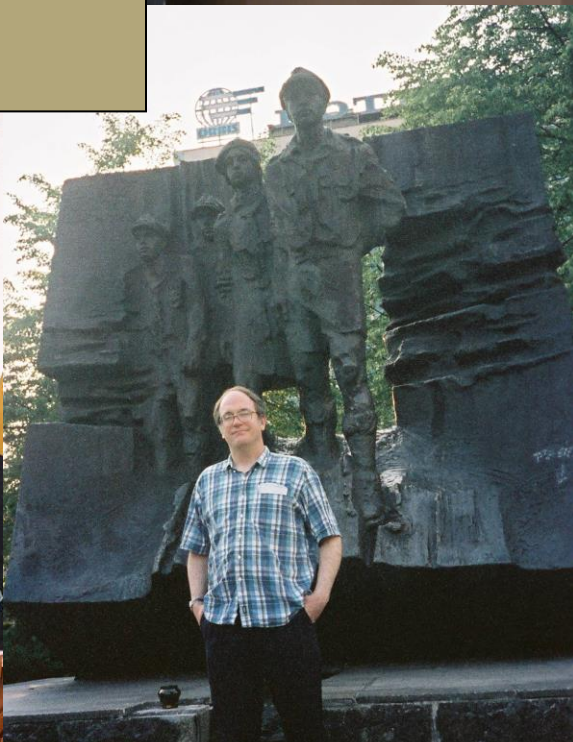




My Back Pages 25

Rich Lynch



My Back Pages 25

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

This 25th installment of my personal time capsule is once again being assembled in the midst of the ongoing world health crisis. And also in the aftermath of a contentious national election which will thankfully succeed in ending the four-year shitshow that is the Donald Trump presidency.

It's been a terrible and at times horrific year, and it's not over yet. As I'm writing this the COVID-19 pandemic is having a new and alarming surge, and the current resident of the Oval Office has yet to concede that he lost the election. So I've constructed this issue such that every essay has some kind of relevancy or resonance to either the pandemic or the election, as they are the defining events of the year. And, as you'll read in the first essay of this issue, one of them will no doubt be looked on as the defining event of the decade.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
December 2020

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

The Whole World's Watching	3
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 137 (September 2020)	
In a New York Minute	5
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 134 (March 2020)	
The Senator Who Ran for the House	17
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 138 (November 2020)	
Of Beer and the Beltway	19
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 125 (September 2018)	
A Case of Life Imitating Art	21
not previously published	
The Best Tribute Album You've Probably Never Listened To	22
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 136 (July 2020)	
Night of the Comet	24
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 136 (July 2020)	
Late Night of the Comet	25
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 137 (September 2020)	
It's Complicated!	27
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 137 (September 2020)	

Non-Covers Photo Credits. Several photos and images (on pages 3, 4, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, and 26) were borrowed from the Internet. Screen capture on page 21 is from my iPhone. Photo of me on page 22 was taken by the cemetery groundskeeper. All other photos were taken by me.

P.O. Box 3120, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20885 USA; [rw_lynch \(at\) yahoo \(dot\) com](mailto:rw_lynch@yahoo.com)
Previous issues are archived at efanzines.com and fanac.org

The Whole World's Watching

I'm a believer, mostly, in the 10-year theory of history, or whatever it's called. There are defining events you can point to which separate one decade from the next, even though they don't necessarily (or even usually) occur right at the stroke of midnight on that decade's final calendar day.

a defining event or moment is one that decides everything that happens afterwards

We are at a defining moment in our history.

An extreme case in point is 9-11, the 19th anniversary of which was just a few days ago as I'm writing this. It, more than anything else, was the dividing point that ended the decade of the 1990s even though it occurred nearly a year into the decade of the 2000s. After 9-11, the 2000s became defined by the so-called 'War on Terror' with protracted military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (the latter still in progress) which overshadowed everything else (both good and bad) that happened in that decade.

For some decades, it's not quite so clear what the ending event was. You could claim, for example, that the end of the 1960s actually occurred in 1969 with the Apollo 11 lunar landing being the defining event – the Space Race certainly ended after that. However, there were other, even bigger things going on socially and politically which the 1960s are known for: the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. But I truly do not believe either of those were the bellwether, as Vietnam persisted well into the 1970s and the civil rights movement is continuing to this day. Instead, I'm gonna say that the 1960s ended, for practical purposes, during the final week of August in 1968. That's when the Democratic National Convention was held.

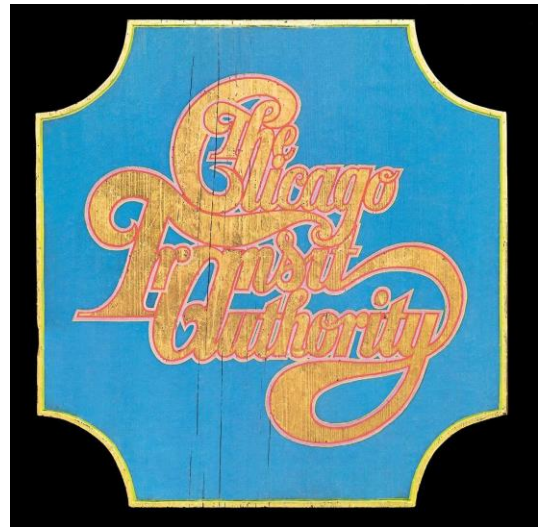
That week in Chicago was the culmination of a year of extreme political turbulence in the United States, and it was exacerbated by the Chicago police force and Illinois National Guard being used to break up what had been a mostly peaceful protest against the Vietnam War being held in a park near the convention site. It quickly escalated into a violent riot, with protestors gassed and brutally beaten by the police, and it resulted in one of the nominating speeches at the convention decrying what was perceived as "Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago". It was all broadcast on the nightly news for the entire world to see.



the Chicago riots of 1968

After that the world changed – politics in the United States was now perceived as a cutthroat rather than a mostly gentlemanly/gentlewomanly endeavor. And mass entertainment, including the music industry, became edgier and less apt to shy away from controversial topics. During

this ongoing pandemic I've been rediscovering some of the rock music albums I listened to from back in the late 1960s, one of them the groundbreaking first album of the band Chicago when they were still known as Chicago Transit Authority. Amidst all the outstanding and memorable music on the album is a politically-charged song titled "Someday" which was inspired by the events of that week. A short intro to the song, titled "Prologue", captures some of the chanting by the protesters as they were being beaten and arrested: *"The whole world's watching! The whole world's watching! The whole world's watching!"* I remember that I listened to that album a lot when it first came out – it was heady stuff for someone who, back then, was on the cusp of adulthood.



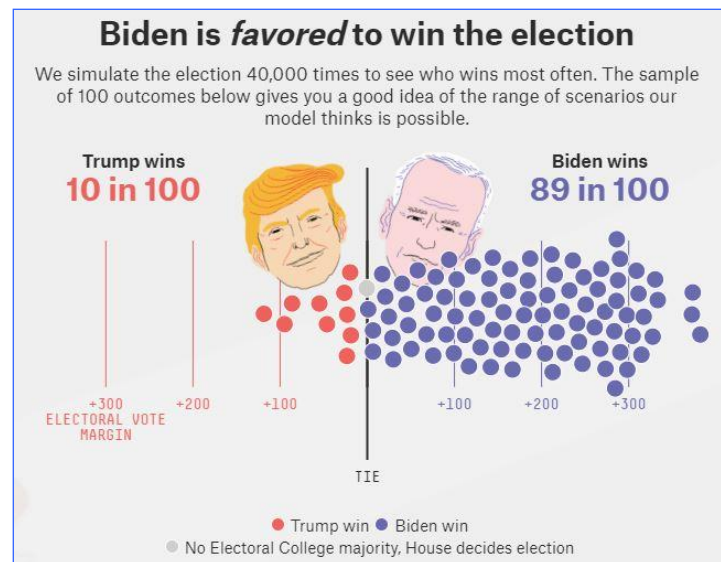
the groundbreaking debut album of Chicago

Back to the present. The defining event that separates the 2010s from the 2020s is always going to be the pandemic, of course. But the whole world is still watching what's going on in U.S. politics – the COVID-19 plague will probably run its course within another year but the result of the 2020 Presidential election will have a profound effect on everybody and everything for years to come. This is the one chance to set things right again. Let's hope for the best. ☀

Afterword:

I finished this essay a few weeks before the election, and by then I had been stressing to the point where I was checking in with the [538.com](https://www.538.com) website several times every day to see how the pre-election polls were trending. The day before the election everything looked pretty promising that Trump and his Republican sycophants were going to get their asses kicked big-time by the voters. But as we know now, the actual outcome did not exactly mirror those polls.

I didn't have to go anywhere near my designated voting location on election day – Nicki and I had cast our ballots a few weeks prior to that. Maryland, like all other states, had authorized mail-in voting and in this time of pandemic it seemed prudent to participate in the election that way. The drop-off point for early voting, at the County Elections Board, is just a few miles from where Nicki and I live, and it's an indication of how strange and different this year has been that going there and back was one of the longer trips I've taken since the pandemic began. In fact, I've not been more than about 25 miles from home all year. Except, as you will read next, for one time back in January – before there *was* a pandemic.



In a New York Minute

I'm gonna wait til the midnight hour.

Here's the thing about being in New York. You can visit there so often that you know the city almost like the back of your hand, and just when you think you've seen it all... well, you really haven't.

Case in point occurred during the annual early January mini-vacation to The Big Apple. Times Square is a busy place at all times of day, and even approaching midnight there are still many people out and about. On the evening of January 9th, my wife Nicki and I were two of them. Normally, early January evenings are bone-chilling cold but this year was a welcome exception. And it was that unseasonably warm weather as well as the closeness of our hotel to Times Square which helped us decide to see a spectacle that we'd found out about only a few hours earlier – the 'Midnight Moment'.

This happens every night between 11:57pm and midnight. It's described as "the world's largest, longest-running digital art exhibition, synchronized on electronic billboards throughout Times Square". And it's pretty impressive – believe me, there are *a lot* of big electronic billboards in Times Square! The one shown during January was a short animated video by multimedia artist Allison Schulnik titled *Moth*, which was intended to greet the brave new year of 2020 "with symbols of birth, renewal, and change". In the span of just 180 seconds we witness a colorful moth flutter about in stop-motion and then metamorphosize into a cocoon which transforms into a series of strange and imaginative creatures. It was mesmerizing.

There were several hundred people present who, like us, had come out just to see this spectacle and a quietness descended on the square while all of us who were there absorbed the imagery surrounding us. And then it was over – Times Square resumed its normal bustle, even that late into the evening. It had all happened in a New York minute. Well, three of them anyway.

Say, isn't that...?

I really look forward to being in New York in January. I actually like the chill in the air and there's almost as much to do as in the warmer months. Not only that, January is the low season which means many of the busiest places in the city are far less claustrophobic. And this includes the TKTS booth, our go-to place for discounted theater tickets.

Trips that Nicki and I take to New York are very Broadway-centric. We started doing them more than a decade ago, and in that time we've been to about 50 shows. It used to be we were exclusively interested in musicals, but this changed several years ago when we discovered that Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart were co-leads in *Waiting for Godot*. It proved to be such an



a small part of the 'Midnight Moment'
in Times Square

entertaining production that ever since then we've incorporated spoken-word plays into the mix of shows we attend. This year we went to two plays, as has been the norm lately, and we figuratively broke new ground because one of them was in a theater we'd never been inside before.

It's the Hayes Theater on West 44th Street, which is actually the smallest of all the performance venues in New York's Theater District. It's been set aside, in effect, for staging plays written by living playwrights, many of them new productions. Such was the case for *Grand Horizons*, a comic drama about what happens to an older empty-nest couple (as well as their two adult sons) when, after fifty years of marriage, a break-up is imminent. This show was the Broadway debut for Bess Wohl, whose previous Off-Broadway plays have garnered wide critical acclaim as well as a basketful of awards and award nominations. But what drew us to it were three recognizable names in the cast: James Cromwell, Jane Alexander, and Ben McKenzie. Nicki and I have seen both Cromwell and McKenzie during recent television watching (Cromwell appeared in several episodes of *Counterpart* while McKenzie was a series regular in *Gotham*), but I was a bit less familiar with Ms. Alexander. That may have been the reason why I didn't recognize her, a couple days after we saw the play, when we walked right past her. But Nicki did!



outside the entrance to the Hayes Theater

It took a couple of seconds to register, and I wouldn't be surprised if we'd left polyurethane skid marks on the sidewalk as we screeched to a halt. "Hey, that was Jane Alexander!" Nicki whispered at me. I looked back just in time to see her going in the theater's stage entrance door. There was no entourage, no limo. It was just this great actress out on the streets by herself, enjoying the relatively balmy January weather.

What the hell were they thinking?

What Nicki and I attended was actually one of the preview performances of *Grand Horizons*, which meant that there were not yet any newspaper reviews of the play – theater critics typically wait for the previews to be over before they attend a show and write their appraisals. So going to a preview performance entails some risk, as there's nothing yet in the press to warn you off if it's a dog of a show. That was definitely not the case for *Grand Horizons* – even though we had relatively little in the way of information to go on, it turned out to be a very polished production. And also very entertaining. But in hindsight we really should have done some due diligence before buying tickets to one of the four musicals we attended.

It was *West Side Story*, the famous and epic show about two competing gangs, the Sharks and the Jets, in 1950s New York, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Like *Grand Horizons*, it was still in previews so there were no newspaper reviews which would have translated over to bad word-of-mouth we undoubtedly would have heard from people at the TKTS booth. At least, I *think* it would have been bad word-of-mouth because I can't imagine

that any reviewer worth his salt would actually like this mutated abomination of what was once a glorious Broadway musical.

But even so, there still were some warning signs in the press if we'd only known about them. A feature story in *The New Yorker*, for instance, described it as "a radical restaging", where Jerome Robbins' Tony Award-winning choreography for the show was entirely scrapped in favor of avant-garde arrangements which incorporated salsa and hip-hop. But that wasn't even the worst part of it. I'm a big believer that musicals and plays should be performed in the manner they were written, even if it means making them retro. That means a musical set in 1950s New York City should not have gang members carrying video cameras. And it also means that there shouldn't be compromises made to the basic premise of the show as a sop to modern-day inclusiveness. The powerful driving force for *West Side Story* was intended to be that the gangs are of different ethnic backgrounds – the Sharks are supposed to be Hispanic and the Jets white Caucasian – which inevitably leads to testosterone-induced violence. But in this revival what we got were two random multi-racial mixed-ethnicity gangs which for whatever reason just don't like each other very much.

And then there was the set. Or rather, the lack of one. In most if not all previous stagings of *West Side Story*, the scenic design has been as much a part of the cast as any of the actors. A quick Google search leads to images of set designs for many different past productions of the show, most if not all of them incredibly rich and lush in their depictions of what the Hell's Kitchen area of New York might have resembled back in the late 1950s. This was not the case for the current revival. What we got was a blank, empty stage.

Well, maybe not entirely blank – the back wall was actually a giant screen, and it was used for pre-recorded videos and stills which substituted for an actual set and also for huge live-action blow-ups of cast members as they were being recorded by those hand-held video cameras. Every once in a while, as dictated by the plot, a door in that huge screen opened to reveal the entrance to a drugstore, inside of which some scenes of the show took place. But since the audience couldn't see any more than just the entrance, those scenes were also shown by video projection onto the big screen. As were other scenes in the offstage bedroom set of one of the main characters, Maria. When that happened the show essentially devolved into a cheaply-produced big screen movie.

And that wasn't even the biggest outrage. The producers left out one of the most iconic songs of the musical, "I Feel Pretty", which is supposed to be sung by Maria at the beginning of the second act. And while they were at it, they also left out the second act itself. *West Side Story* is supposed to be a two-act show, with a dramatic end to the first act at the conclusion of a brutal rumble between the Sharks and Jets. But this revival was just a single act, start to finish. I'm gonna be cynical and say that it was planned that way because if it were two acts, the producers were afraid that half the audience would walk out at the intermission. It was that awful.

I'm really, really disappointed that this is probably what my memories of seeing a live performance of that famous musical are always going to be. But you know what was the worst thing of all? *West Side Story* had been a show that I had very much wanted to see. (A good production of it, anyway.) It wasn't one of the shows available at TKTS so Nicki and I decided that, what the hell, we'd make an exception and pay for full price seats. What a mistake! As we left the theater I remarked to Nicki that those were the most expensive movie tickets we'd ever purchased. I promise you we'll be a lot smarter after this.

Oklahoma! is... okay.

The one very thin silver lining for us about our *West Side Story* experience was that it made *Oklahoma!* seem really good by comparison. I had wanted to see the show because I'm a fan of Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals, and this was the last one we needed to complete the set, so to say – except for a few shows which no longer seem to be in theater repertoire, we had seen all the others. Nicki had been a bit ambivalent about *Oklahoma!*, though, because of all the R&H musicals, this is one of the darkest.

When you attend an R&H musical, you're going to get some social commentary. In *South Pacific*, for instance, there was an underlying racism which had to be overcome by the main female character. *Carousel* deals with domestic violence by one of the main characters, while *The King and I* is about culture clash and *The Sound of Music* portends the coming of war and choices that must be made between country and family.

And in this version of *Oklahoma!*, there was plenty of frontier justice including even a summary execution. Which made for a jarring contrast to all the joyful music in the show.



outside the Circle in the Square Theater on January 8th



just before the start of Act 1

Oklahoma! did win the Tony Award in 2019 for Best Revival of a Musical, so we knew going in that it would not be a bad production. But after seeing it, I'm not going to say it was a good one, either. There certainly was a lot to like – the music was wonderful, of course, with many great songs, and the orchestra musicians were terrific. And I also liked the cast, which featured a Tony Award winner (Ali Stroker as the flirtatious Ado Annie). But I absolutely *hated* the staging of the show.

Part of the problem was that, in my opinion at least, *Oklahoma!* should not be performed in the round – doing that makes it nearly impossible to have anything more than minimal production values. But that's apparently what the plan was – from what I've read, the director's vision was to strip the show to its bare essentials. So much so that the entirety of the set was the sparse interior of what looked to be a western small town meeting hall. And a lot of the acting took place around the perimeter.

It must have been really intimate for those who were sitting in the first few rows but the reality of a theater-in-the-round production like this one is that quite often the views you get of the characters are the backs of their heads.

A much bigger issue I had with the staging was with all the anachronisms. For a musical ostensibly set in 1906, costumes should not have zippers. Characters should not be drinking Bud Light. Chili should not be shown as being prepared in modern crock-pots. And, as was the

case for *West Side Story*, characters in the play should not be carrying around hand-held video cameras for projecting close-ups of other characters on the far wall of the theater. But the biggest and by far most objectionable fault, at least for me, was the dance which opened the second act. The original production of *Oklahoma!* had a rustic dream sequence ballet choreographed by the great Agnes de Mille at the very end of the first act. This serves to put to rest the emotional angst of Laurey, the lead female character, on who would be the love of her life and it sets the stage for the second act where it all plays out. But for this revival, what we got was an abstract modern dance by a soloist performer, in modern-day clothes and who did not appear elsewhere in the musical, and it happened at the beginning of Act 2 in place of an orchestral Entr'acte overture. It did not advance the plot in any way. I can only imagine that Rodgers and Hammerstein, if not outright spinning in their graves, were at the very least twitching uncontrollably.

Still, I'm not sorry that I went to the performance. Great music and a very talented cast can make up for a lot, and in the end I did come away with more good memories than bad. And it was good to see another show in the Circle in the Square Theatre. It's the only Broadway theater specifically designed for performances-in-the-round, and Nicki and I had last been there a couple of years earlier for the *a capella* musical *In Transit*. But it, unlike *Oklahoma!*, had been developed for exactly that kind of staging. After this, we're going to have to be a bit more cautious about seeing shows there.

It's time to play the music, it's time to light the lights.

Neither *West Side Story* nor *Oklahoma!* lived up to our expectations, but there was a place we visited which more than exceeded them – the Museum of the Moving Image, located out in Queens next to the Kaufman Astoria Studios. MMI's overall mission, according to the museum's website, is to “advance the understanding, enjoyment, and appreciation of the art, history, technique, and technology of film, television and digital media”, and from what Nicki and I saw there was ample evidence that it was succeeding.

There's not a whole lot of space available (just two floors), but what they had was used intelligently. The upper floor was set up as a walk



entrance to the Museum of the Moving Image



the museum's collection of magic lanterns

through the history of the moving image, beginning with a collection of magic lanterns dating back to the end of the 19th Century. A lot of it was hands-on – the core exhibition, *Behind the Screen*, provides a simplified immersive experience, as the museum's website describes it, “in the creative and technical process of producing, promoting, and presenting films, television shows, and

digital entertainment”. This included small studios for demonstrating various post-production techniques such as adding foley sound effects to a recorded video. It was all pretty fascinating to observe, and just by itself was worth the visit to the museum.

But that’s not what we had come there to see. The other floor of the museum, since 2017, has been home to *The Jim Henson Exhibition*. MMI describes it as a “dynamic experience [which] explores Jim Henson’s groundbreaking work for film and television and his transformative impact on culture”. In all there are about 300 items on display for what is really a quite inclusive



entrance to *The Jim Henson Exhibition*



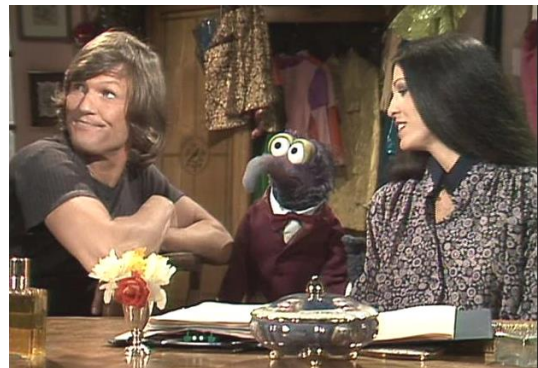
Nicki with Big Bird and Cookie Monster

retrospective of Henson’s career as a puppeteer, animator, actor, inventor, and filmmaker. This includes many of the Muppets, and the museum had obviously arranged them with the assumption that they would be part of countless numbers of selfies and photo ops. Ours included.

The exhibition consisted of more than just static displays. There were also video screens that showcased some of Henson’s earliest involvement in television, including the *Sam and Friends* show for WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. which aired for several years starting in the mid-1950s. That was where Kermit the Frog made his first appearance.

Henson and his fellow puppeteer Frank Oz gained national popularity in the early 1960s when one of their Muppets, Rowlf the Dog, had a continuing role as a sidekick of sorts on *The Jimmy Dean Show*. And then international popularity in the late 1960s when their Muppets became featured performers on the public television show *Sesame Street*. But for me and Nicki, we became fans of the Muppets when they got their own syndicated television series in the mid-1970s.

The Muppet Show was ostensibly a variety show, hosted by Kermit, and featured some very entertaining sketch comedy as well as a plethora of famous guest stars. So it was really a pleasure to spend half an hour, in the exhibition’s screening room, re-watching an episode which had originally aired more than 40 years ago. The one they were showing featured Kris Kristofferson and Rita Coolidge as musical guests, but the Muppets themselves had the most amusing bits: Resident daredevil The Great Gonzo recited a multiplication table while standing on a hammock and balancing a piano (with predictably disastrous results). Mad scientist Dr. Bunsen Honeydew debuted his



Kris and Rita are joined by *The Great Gonzo*

latest invention, atomic elevator shoes. Weight-conscious Miss Piggy ordered up a watercress sandwich on whole wheat with four ounces of rhubarb juice, otherwise known as the ‘Fatso Special’. Feral rock band drummer Animal ate a TV dinner, which turned out to be an actual TV. And the show’s resident stand-up comic, Fozzie Bear (accompanied by Rowlf), sang “Hi-Diddle-Dee-Dee, An Actor’s Life for Me”. More than 40 years on, it was all just as enjoyable as the first time we’d seen it.

So *that’s* how they do it.

There was also a Broadway musical we went to that was just as enjoyable as the first time we’d seen it. And maybe even more so, since we had better seats this time. This was the first occasion, in all the years Nicki and I had been coming to New York for these mini-vacations, we’d gone to a Broadway show a second time. And for that we chose *The Phantom of the Opera*. The previous time we’d attended a performance was eleven years earlier, on the evening of January 15, 2009. I know this because that’s the day US Airways pilot Sully Sullenberger had to land a jetliner in the Hudson River.

There was thankfully nothing like that to contend with this time. Even the rain that had been forecasted never happened. The biggest problem we encountered was negotiating our way through the long lines of people who had been queueing up for evening performances of other shows at nearby theaters. Seeing *Phantom* again allowed me to finally find out something I’d been wondering about for all these years since the first time we’d gone to it. Near the beginning of the show, the giant crystal chandelier rises up over the audience to the *Phantom* theme played by a pipe organ: *BAHHHH ba ba ba*

BAWWWWW ba ba ba BAAAAHHHHH. The sound is so overpowering that it literally fills the entire theater, right down to every nook and cranny.



[on the way into the theater to see *Phantom*](#)

But there’s no pipe organ in the theater, so how in the heck did they *do* that?

During the intermission I decided to find out. I walked down to the orchestra pit and saw that the musicians were relaxing and chatting among themselves, so I asked the violinist where the pipe organ sound came from. She pointed and said, “There.”

I looked where she was pointing. “That??” I asked her.

She nodded. “That!”

It was a non-descript keyboard. “You’re kidding!” I told her. “It’s just this little electronic piano!”

The orchestra director, who was apparently also the keyboardist, had been observing this exchange with some amusement. He told me, “Amazing what you can do with the right technology. And lots of amplification.”

“Wow!” I replied to him. And then: “I bet you guys could play the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony with that set-up!”

He nodded in agreement and said, “We probably could.” And then gestured over toward the violinist. “But we’d need more sound from the string section.”

“Hah!” she said in what seemed to me mock indignation. And at that point it was time to head back toward my seat.

It was a splendid show, about a strange love triangle that had no happy ending. But the lavish scenic design and staging was so grand that it, and not the actors, was often the center of my attention. Which is probably one of the reasons that *Phantom* has been so successful – the week Nicki and I were in New York was the 32nd anniversary of the first preview performances at the Majestic Theatre, and it’s been playing there ever since with no end in sight. It’s a show that really deserves being seen more than once, and it doesn’t seem possible that eleven years have passed since our first time. I’m pretty certain it won’t be another eleven until the next.

Sometimes Lady Luck smiles upon you.

Going to a performance of *The Phantom of the Opera* again was a terrific way of beginning our Big Apple mini-vacation. But in my opinion it wasn’t the best show that we saw. There were two that were even better, one of them a play and one a musical.

The play was one that had been on our shortlist for our previous trip to New York at the beginning of 2019 – *To Kill a Mockingbird*, adapted from Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by screenwriter Aaron Sorkin and starring Jeff Daniels as attorney Atticus Finch. But we didn’t go to a performance then – discounted tickets weren’t available at TKTS and we’d had no trouble finding five other good shows to attend. However, there was still some regret on not seeing it and for the remainder of the year I was afraid the play would close before our next New York trip. That it hadn’t was very good news, but it didn’t mean we’d have an easy time getting tickets. Doing that turned out to be a bit of challenge.



the Shubert Theatre back in 2019

When we checked, we saw that the show was still not available at TKTS so we trudged over to the Shubert Theatre’s box office to see what our chances were for regular-priced tickets. To our dismay we were informed by the box office guy that only standing room was still available – we knew it would be daunting for us to be on our feet for that long. But just as we were about to leave, he said something that gave us a smidgeon of hope: “You might want to come back at about five o’clock to see if any orchestra-level seats have freed up.”

I thought it pretty unlikely that would happen, so for the next two hours we discussed alternatives. In the end it came down to two options: standing room for *Mockingbird*, or discount seats for the new musical *Beetlejuice* (whose reviews had not been complimentary – the *New York Post* theater critic had described it as “a coke-snorting, F-bombing flop”). It was an easy choice: “I’ll change into comfortable shoes and take an ibuprofen for back pain,” Nicki said. And with that, at five o’clock we trudged on back to the Shubert.

To our surprise there was good fortune awaiting us there! The box office guy informed us that something not very usual had happened – two seats had come available in the front row, and would we like to purchase them instead of standing room?

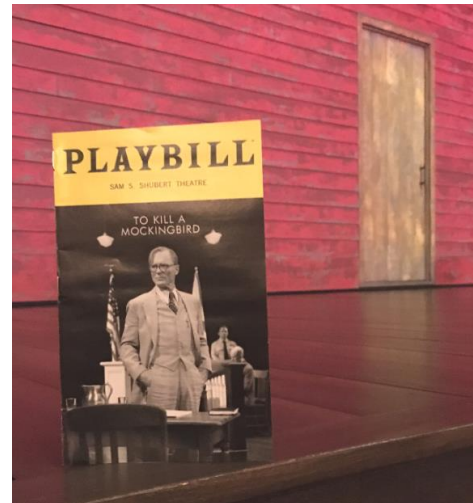
I think I replied something like: “Oh HELL yes!”

The show didn’t let us down. As most of us know, the play takes place in a racist rural Alabama town during the Great Depression and the plot centers around the trial of a black man who had been unjustly accused of raping a white woman, with Atticus Finch conscripted into becoming the defense lawyer. As I mentioned, most of us in the theater already knew that. But not *all* of us – it was completely new to me. I’m embarrassed to say that I had neither read the novel nor seen the 1962 film adaptation. But not knowing how it was going to end actually made it an even better experience.

What I ‘witnessed’ from up close was a master class in how a great book had been transformed into a great play, and it started with the staging. A lot of thought had obviously gone into it, because at various times a previously blank stage was quickly transformed to the interior of a courthouse and at other times to the exterior of Finch’s home. It had been designed in a way to effectively allow the play’s narrators (Finch’s two children, Jem and Scout, and their friend Dill) to break the fourth wall and interact with the audience. And the excellent script by Sorkin made it possible for them to seamlessly transition from characters to narrators and back to characters again at several different times. But what really made this a superior production were the actors, all of whom gave very polished performances. And it turned out that most of them were replacements – by the time we finally got to see the play, just about all of the original cast, including Jeff Daniels, had left the show.

But the thing about a high-profile Broadway production is that when a celebrity actor in the cast departs the show, the replacement is usually another celebrity actor. Such was the case for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch was now being played by Ed Harris, who’s been one of our favorite actors ever since we first saw him in George A. Romero’s 1981 cult classic movie *Knightriders*. One of his best roles was his Oscar-nominated performance in *Apollo 13*, and I have to admit that I was half-hoping he’d ad lib “Failure is not an option!” at some point during one of the courthouse scenes.

It felt surreal, being that close to Ed Harris. During the courthouse scenes the defendant’s table was positioned on the stage right in front of where Nicki and I were sitting, and there were times when he was no more than 15 feet away from us. As Nicki put it, he was close enough where she could have hit him with a cough drop. (Not that either of us would ever have done anything like that.) Instead, he was an easy target for all the applause at the end of the show. And well deserved. It was a really excellent play.



Front row seats!

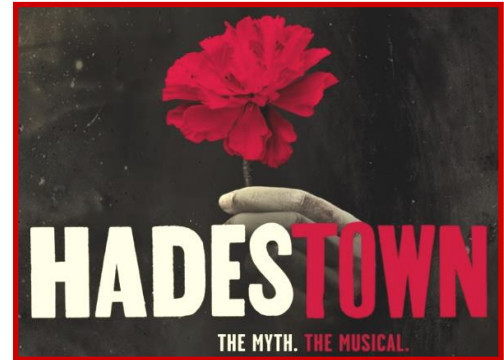


Ed Harris as Atticus Finch

It's a case of life imitating art.

In all, Nicki and I saw six shows in the four days we were in New York. A new mini-vacation record for us, and it even impressed the people who shepherd ticket-buying lines at the TKTS booth: “That’s *awesome!*” one of them told us. As of this trip the paradigm has now shifted – TKTS is still going to be the first place we go to look for tickets for shows we want to see, but it’s no longer going to be the *only* place. If shows we’re interested aren’t listed at TKTS we’ll investigate other options, even if that means getting them at theater box offices. As it happened, that didn’t work out very well for *West Side Story*. But we had spectacular success for *Mockingbird*, and also for what in my opinion was the best musical of the trip: *Hadestown*.

I’m not surprised that *Hadestown* wasn’t one of the shows available at TKTS. It’s been one of the most popular musicals on Broadway ever since it opened back last April and it cleaned up at the 2019 Tony Awards, winning eight Tonys including Best New Musical and Best Original Score. The matinee we were at was a special performance to benefit The Actors Fund and it had some special attendees – a few rows ahead of us, down at stage right, about a dozen people were receiving American Sign Language interpretation. One of them was Russell Harvard, a hearing-impaired actor we’d seen the previous evening in the cast of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Now I know what Broadway actors do on some of their afternoons off – they see other Broadway shows.



I really, really liked *Hadestown*. It’s a re-imagining of the ancient Greek myth about Orpheus and Eurydice in a setting which resembles Great Depression-era New Orleans. Orpheus is a street musician who just cannot seem to finish writing his song, and Eurydice is a drifter who falls in love with him. Hades and his wife Persephone are also characters, as are the Fates and Hermes (the latter functioning as a one-man Greek Chorus). *Hadestown* is depicted as an industrialized underworld that’s being built by a soulless indentured labor workforce which can never leave (as Eurydice eventually finds out to her regret). It has become a prosperous island in a sea of poverty, with a foundry and even an electric power infrastructure. And also a wall, which is the subject of the musical’s most powerful song, “Why We Build the Wall”. It’s sung by Hades accompanied by the Fates and other cast members, and one of the things that makes the song so imposing and ominous is that the actor portraying Hades, Patrick Page, has a voice at least an octave below bass. Here’s a sampling:



Hades and the Fates sing “Why We Build the Wall”

“Why do we build the wall? My children, my children, why do we build the wall? ... Because we have and they have not! Because they want what we have got! The enemy is poverty, and the wall keeps out the enemy. And we build the wall to keep us free. That’s why we build the wall, we build the wall to keep us free!”

There's obvious resonance with today's political situation, of course, but the *Hadestown* musical, including that song, was written years before the Trump era. It was created by Vermont singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell, who back in 2006 decided she wanted to write a folk opera. Between then and now there were two preliminary versions of the musical as well as a concept album by Mitchell, with work on what became the Broadway production starting in 2012.

Hadestown debuted on Broadway the better part of a year ago, so it was a pleasant surprise that the entire original cast was still in the show. The only names we were familiar with were Reeve Carney who played Orpheus (we'd seen him in the *Penny Dreadful* cable TV series) and Eva Noblezada as Eurydice (we'd seen her in the *Miss Saigon* musical two years earlier). But the most prominent actors in the show were André De Shields, who played Hermes, and Amber Gray as Persephone. De Shields won a Tony for the role, beating out Patrick Page among others, but it was Gray who had the best moments on stage. Her Persephone, Queen of the Underworld and Goddess of Fertility, must spend six months of every year down in Hadestown (which brings on autumn and winter up on the surface). But in the other six months she's a free spirit "Livin' It Up on Top" – one of many good songs in the show, all of which advance the plot in their own ways. Some were staged really creatively, an example of which was another by Persephone, "Our Lady of the Underground", that opened the second act. It was done as if she were headlining a nightclub, complete with a small jazz band. What made it both unusual and memorable was that during the song she breaks the fourth wall by individually introducing the band members to the audience.



Persephone is "Our Lady of the Underground"

So I'm also going to break the fourth wall and highly recommend this extraordinary musical to you, dear readers. I've read that later in 2020 it will be going on tour to more than 30 cities (appropriately, one of them New Orleans), and you absolutely MUST see it when it comes to a playhouse near you. Do not miss out – it's that good.

I guess some people are just naturally resistant to cold.

As I mentioned earlier, this was the most Broadway-centric trip to New York that Nicki and I have ever done. Six shows and one museum visit didn't allow much opportunity to find other stuff. But once in a while, other stuff will find you. And that's what happened on the coldest day of the trip. Nicki and I were making our way through Times Square toward the TKTS booth when we caught sight of the Naked Cowboy.

His real name is Robert John Burck, and he's been making a living mostly as a street performer since the late 1990s. You really can't miss him when he's out and about as his costume consists of a cowboy hat, guitar, cowboy boots, and Fruit-of-the-Loom tighty-whities. The guy is really outgoing, so much



Nicki and the Naked Cowboy

so that he's become a Times Square icon. (He even had a brief cameo in the *Sharknado* movie that was set in New York.) He was only too happy to pose with Nicki for a photo-op, even insisting that I take two photographs – front and back. And then he gave Nicki a promotional picture postcard which he signed for her. All the while not showing even a single goose bump. That alone was as awesome a performance, in its own way, as any we'd beheld in the theaters.

I typically end these New York essays by mentioning that we enjoy being in the city so much that we can't wait for the next opportunity. And that's absolutely true for this one as well. What had originally been a three-day winter getaway has expanded into a four-day mini-vacation because there's been so much to see and do. But truth be told, that's not long enough either. We could possibly extend to a fifth day – I'll have more time available for next year, as I will most certainly be retired by then. But at some point we're going to want to go there in warmer weather months to do things that aren't possible during the winter. And there are no lack of those.

It's a great city. We had a good time. ☀

(Excerpt from "Why We Build the Wall" ©2006 by Anaïs Mitchell.)



much more of the Naked Cowboy

Afterword:

Where to begin? So much has happened since January that it feels like that trip up to New York took place in some alternate universe. Broadway theaters shut down in mid-March and have yet to resume performances. I've read it will probably be sometime in the second half of 2021 before that will happen. *West Side Story*, which to my amazement was *not* savaged by the theatre critics, didn't have its official opening before the pandemic closed things down so it will not be a nominee for a Tony Award this year. This is somewhat karmic, as far as I'm concerned – crapola like that should not be up for major awards.

And as for *Hadestown*, Nicki and I would certainly like to see it again if it hasn't closed by the next time we're in town. We'll be well into the Biden Administration by then and all the comparisons of the Hadestown wall with Trump's border wall will have run their course. Maybe. And one other thing about the performance we attended – turns out that hearing-impaired actor Russell Harvard, who was also in the audience, had a small but important role in one of our favorite cable TV series. He played the hitman 'Mr. Wrench' in the first season of *Fargo*.

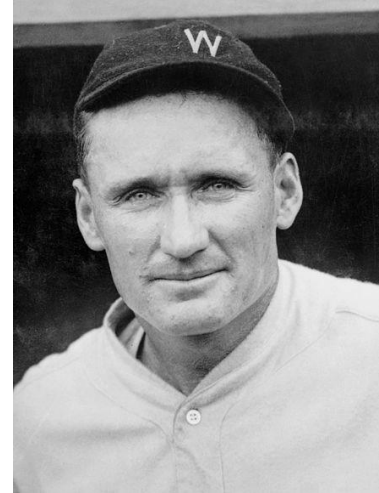
Most likely it will be no earlier than July before Nicki and I will make it back to New York. By then there will be effective vaccines against COVID-19 and it will be safe to be out in public again. Until then there are places around here that can be visited on socially-distanced short day trips. One of them is in nearby Rockville, or rather a quiet, pastoral place a couple of miles from the city center. It's where one of Maryland's most famous citizens now resides.



Russell Harvard as the villainous Mr. Wrench

The Senator Who Ran for the House

There was an interesting article by historian Frederic Frommer in *The Washington Post*, on the Sunday before the election, about someone who is arguably the greatest Senator of them all – Walter “Big Train” Johnson, who pitched for the Washington Senators baseball team way back in the early years of the 20th century and who, along with Babe Ruth, was one of the first five players to be enshrined in Baseball’s Hall of Fame. In all, he played 21 seasons for the Senators, including their World Series-winning year 1924 where he was the winning pitcher of the deciding 7th game, and even now holds many Major League records including number of shutouts pitched (an astonishing 110 of them, a record which will probably never be broken).



Walter “Big Train” Johnson

But Frommer’s story was not so much about Johnson’s baseball exploits as his life after baseball. Specifically the year 1940, when Johnson was the Republican candidate for Congress in what was then Maryland’s 6th Congressional District. It was a Presidential election year and, like what we’ve just experienced, there was much acrimony in the run-up to the voting. Only that time it was the Republicans who were railing against the Democratic President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was running for an unprecedented third term. FDR was being disparaged as a would-be autocrat who threatened American democracy, and the GOP took delight in using Johnson as a crowd-drawing attraction along the campaign trail to introduce their Presidential candidate, Wendell Willkie, at speaking events.

But it turned out that Johnson, in his own election campaign for a House of Representatives seat, was probably not the candidate that the Republicans hoped he would be. He was just too gosh darn *nice*. Johnson’s Democratic incumbent adversary, William D. Byron, later stated that: “In all my political life, I never met an opponent like Walter. He never said one unkind or uncomplimentary thing about me.” In his article, Frommer wrote that Johnson “didn’t share his fellow Republicans’ killer instinct. He hardly campaigned, and when he did he often focused on local issues and spoke in platitudes. He refrained from going negative.” And being a political novice did not serve him well. Republican Congressman Joseph Martin, who had recruited Johnson to run for office, later stated that: “He was an utterly inexperienced speaker. I got some of my boys to write two master speeches for him – one for the farmers of his district and the other for the industrial areas. Alas, he got the two confused. He addressed the farmers on industrial problems and the businessmen on farm problems.” Not surprisingly, Johnson didn’t win, losing to Byron by about 8,000 votes (which equated to about 6 percentage points).

Walter Johnson was born in Kansas and lived for a while in California, but once he became a Senator he made his home in Maryland. Specifically in Bethesda, where he had a house, and after that in Germantown, where he had a 550-acre farm. The house still exists (it’s now doctors’ offices), but nothing remains of the farm. The buildings are long gone and the acreage has long since been repurposed for other uses. I work in Germantown, or did before the COVID-19 pandemic caused my current work-from-home arrangement, and Frommer’s article piqued my interest in Johnson enough that I researched the exact location where the farmhouse

once stood. The address turns out to be very near a street that I have passed along hundreds of times in the decades I've lived here in Maryland.

Today there are some things in this part of Maryland which rightfully honor the esteemed Senators pitcher. There is a Walter Johnson Drive in Germantown (a narrow dead-end side street, unfortunately), a Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda (the school's yearbook is named *The Windup* and its newspaper *The Pitch*), the Bethesda Big Train (a summer community baseball club for talented collegiate players), and a statue of Johnson (constructed mostly from wood) that was recently installed in a public park in Rockville. And, oh yeah, there is also a small informal memorial to him at his gravesite.

Before I read Frommer's article, it had never occurred to me to visit Johnson's grave. Heck, I hadn't even realized that he was buried here in Maryland. The cemetery where he's interred turned out to be a couple of miles from Rockville city center, and it took me almost as long to find his grave once I arrived as it did to drive there. Nicki is also a baseball fan and came along with me, as she had also wanted to pay her respects as much as I did. And it was she who first spotted the headstone. Atop it were several baseballs and a few Senators hats, and sitting on the ground next to it was a framed reproduction of the famous 1915 Cracker Jack card that depicted Johnson in his pitching motion. From their weathered and sun-bleached condition, all of them appeared to have been there for a long time.



Walter Johnson's gravesite

Johnson never dabbled in politics again after his ill-fated run for Congress and died of a brain tumor in December 1946, just a few weeks after his 59th birthday. As you'd expect, here in the Washington area he is a revered sports hero. So much so that he is one of only three Washington, D.C. baseball players honored by statues at the home stadium of the Washington Nationals baseball team. That his gravesite is still pretty much an undiscovered roadside attraction for sports enthusiasts seems a bit puzzling – there were no other visitors the day we were there – but maybe that's the way he would have wanted it. By all accounts he enjoyed the bucolic life in his final years, and Rockville Cemetery is certainly a quiet, pastoral setting. It's a good place for meditation and I found myself doing just that – wondering what it must have been like, back in the 1920s, to witness a game of baseball pitched by the great Walter Johnson. ☀

Afterword:

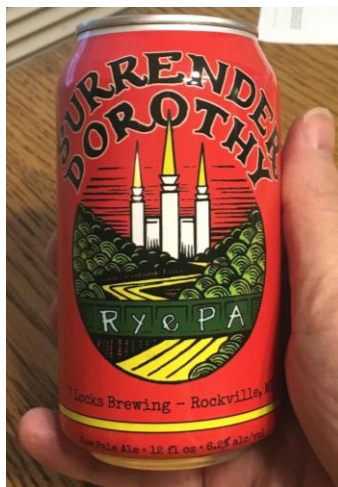
It's only three miles from Walter Johnson's grave to another roadside attraction in Rockville. But this other site is actually a place of business – the 7 Locks craft brewery, to be specific. Small breweries are known for having clever names for their beers and ales, often honoring or sometimes even riffing on names of locally famous people, places, or events. And 7 Locks is no exception, with offerings such as Paint Branch Pilsner (named after a tributary into the Potomac River system), MD355 IPA (from the numbered Maryland highway that runs through Rockville), and Below the Belt Blonde Ale (actually a reference to the Washington Beltway). But their most clever name for a brew is actually something that you'd almost have to be a Washington-area resident to understand (if not appreciate). So let me explain...

Of Beer and the Beltway

As of September it will be thirty years that I have been living in the Washington, D.C. metro area. That's long enough where I've come to understand (if not appreciate) that there's a special brand of humor that exists here. No, it's not about all the politician carpetbaggers who make their second homes in the city – that kind of humor is all-pervading everywhere, I'd expect. Instead, it's a type of insider humor, where only those who live here in the Washington area would understand (if not appreciate) it.

Here's an example: *What do you get when you mix orange, yellow, green and blue?* The answer: *L'Enfant Plaza*.

So that you can understand (if not appreciate) this 20+ year old joke, here's an explanation. The Washington Metrorail System color-codes its individual subway lines, and the L'Enfant Plaza Station is the only one that is serviced by the Orange, Yellow, Green, and Blue lines. More clever than funny, but that's the nature of D.C. insider humor.

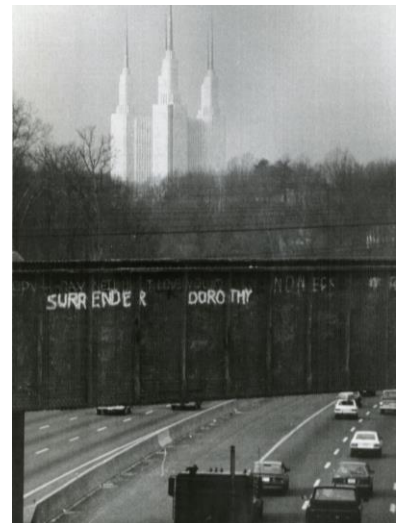


Lately, I've become aware of a much more recent example of this kind of insider wit and it was depicted, of all places, on a beer can. The 7 Locks Brewing Company, located just outside the Washington Beltway in Rockville, Maryland, has been creating craft beers since 2015 but only lately has their distribution apparently ramped up to the point where you can find the stuff in local beer outlets. The place I go to started carrying 7 Locks brews just a couple of months ago, and the one that immediately caught my eye was a Rye Pale Ale in a distinctive red can: Surrender Dorothy.

At first glance you might think the name is a riff on the famous musical *The Wizard of Oz*, where the Wicked Witch of the West skywrites those two words over the walled city of Oz to intimidate Dorothy Gale and her Yellow Brick Road companions. But it's more subtle than that.

What's *actually* illustrated on the can is not the Emerald City of Oz – it's a local landmark, the Mormon Temple, which is an impressive and imposing sight to those traveling along the northern section of the Washington Beltway. And that's not the Yellow Brick Road, either – it's the Beltway itself, complete with some of the turns and undulations which give that section of the road a descriptive nickname: the Rollercoaster. There's even a railroad overpass shown on the can which actually exists more or less where it's depicted, and that's where the insider humor comes in. Back in the mid-1970s, in recognition of how closely the Mormon Temple resembles Oz as depicted in the movie, some enterprising prankster risked life and limb to spray paint "Surrender Dorothy" on that overpass.

It didn't remain for very long – it was soon painted over – but it lasted long enough to become an entrenched part of what



"Surrender Dorothy"
from the mid-1970s

makes Washington Washington. As for me, I've now enjoyed several cans of the brew and have found it to be quite pleasant and only marginally hoppy. You can find out for yourself – if you come to visit I'll bring you to the 7 Locks Brewery, where it's on tap there.

Hey, first round's on me! ☀

Afterword:

I originally hadn't planned on including this essay in the issue, as it didn't have any obvious relevance to either the pandemic or the election. But I changed my mind soon after the election and it's all because of Trump, of course.

I've already mentioned that the pre-election polls were not mirrored by election night returns, and this became glaringly evident by mid-evening when Trump was declared the winner in two so-called 'battleground' states he'd been predicted to lose. Even worse, as the evening progressed Trump was shown as leading in enough states to be re-elected and by bedtime I had just about resigned myself that this was going to be like 2016 all over again with another Trump victory. But that's not what happened, thanks to all the mail-in votes which had been cast prior to the election by mostly anti-Trump voters. When I woke up the next morning I was relieved to learn that none of the other battleground states had been called for Trump and that he was now in danger of losing. But then things got surreal.

In the days following the election, after balloting tallies had swung against him, Trump began an outrageous and disgraceful all-out attempt to overturn the will of the voters with bogus claims of widespread election fraud. Part of this strategy was to encourage Republican-majority legislatures in key states to brazenly nullify the election results by appointing Trump-friendly slates of electors in place of Biden's electors that were chosen by the voters, thereby stealing the election in a legislative coup. All of the unhinged conspiracy theories being bandied about by Trump and his buffoonish team of lawyers in support of this plan were absurd to the point of being comical (and were easily debunked), but it was still subliminally terrifying to me, at the time, in knowing there was a non-zero chance that the tactic could actually succeed.

Against all this, there was a welcome bit of comic relief – a short item on a local news broadcast a few days after the election, after it had become clear Trump had lost but had no intention of conceding, featured that same "Surrender Dorothy" railroad overpass. Somebody had spray painted a contemporary and direct-to-the-point update of that mid-1970s prank. It was hilarious.

The local news called the caper vandalism, but I think that's unfair. It's just an ugly steel span that has an odd legacy attached to it. Which has now been enriched by some 21st century political commentary. Ya gotta love it.

This next article is also about something ya gotta love. Back in 2013 some programmers in the U.K. came up with an idea for a clever smartphone app which can precisely locate a person anywhere on Earth. And, in the process, also created an amusing diversion which I found has relevance to the current political situation. See for yourself...

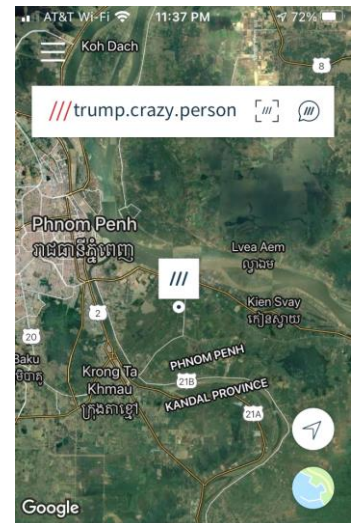


A Case of Life Imitating Art

There was a story at the CNN website, back in February, about the rescue of four men who had gotten themselves trapped by a blizzard near the top of the United Kingdom's highest mountain. They'd apparently been out for a hike and did not have the proper gear to survive in such harsh conditions. But they did have a cell phone, and with it a useful geocode app which allowed searchers to exactly pinpoint their location on the mountain and hasten their rescue.

This miracle app, What3Words, has been existence since 2013. The way it works is via a clever encoding system, where the entire surface of the world has been subdivided into 3 meter-by-3 meter squares – about 57 *trillion* of them in all – with each of them assigned a unique three word identifier. For instance, my exact location as I'm writing this essay is at home in the square designated as **player.flops.loaded**. The couch where Nicki and I watch TV is about 10 meters away in the square designated as **jumps.order.career**. You can see how useful this is. If I were ever to have a medical emergency of some kind while away from home, I could just relay the three-word code of my location (as determined by the app) to the 911 operator and they would know exactly where to find me. And that's basically how those hikers were saved.

I've read that about 40,000 English-language words were used in the app which, if you do the math, yields way, way more than the number of unique three-word combinations needed to completely cover the Earth. That means not every possible combination exists, including some obvious ones like **ice.cream.cone**. But there are lots of fun ones which do, more than enough to make an entertaining Zoom party diversion (**science.fiction.fan**, for example, is located in Plano, Texas). And, in the denouement of the Presidential election, it's also possible to make a political statement using the app. For instance, the 3-meter square designated as **trump.lost.elections** is located in the icy mountains of central Norway – with any luck, Trump's political fortunes will end up in that kind of wilderness. Similarly, there's also **trump.lost.appeal** which is located in another cold desolate spot, the middle of Alaska. And here's one that seems *really* descriptive, considering how the election aftermath is playing out: **trump.crazy.person** which looks to be in the middle of a construction site near Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Maybe he'll be wanting to build a hotel there, if he can avoid being indicted.



I've barely scratched the surface, but this is already one of my favorite apps. I hope I'll never need it for an urgent situation but I do expect there'll be many other things I can use it for. After all, it's not just an essential part of emergency preparedness. With Trump's post-election shenanigans, results from the app have already been, in effect, a case of life imitating art. ☀

Afterword:

There was another real-world case of life imitating art earlier this year and it was a sad one – the ashes of singer/songwriter John Prine, who died in the pandemic, were put into the Green River in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, so that his soul could “roll on up to the Rochester Dam”, as he'd stated in one of his lyrics from “Paradise”. That's one of my favorite John Prine songs but as you will read next, probably not my *most* favorite one.

The Best Tribute Album You've Probably Never Listened To

It's more difficult than you'd think to write an essay in the middle of a pandemic.

I do a lot of my essays about places I've been and things I've experienced away from home, but that hasn't been an option since all of this began back in March. Instead, while we're all waiting for things to head back toward normalcy (however long *that* may take), I have to look a bit more inward for things I can write about. Like noting the passing of John Prine, for instance.

He's one of the most esteemed roots music singer/songwriters, and was taken from the world by the COVID-19 pandemic back at the beginning of April. I've been a great admirer of John Prine's music for many years, and even have a connection of sorts to him – his song "Paradise" is about a small town in western Kentucky that no longer exists, a victim of large-scale strip mining for coal. I identify with the song because I've been to Paradise, or what became of it, many times – back in the 1980s I was lead engineer for a project at a large power plant that was built on the site of the town. I never was fortunate enough to have met Mr. Prine or attend one of his concerts, but I'm still only 'three degrees' from him – Prine credited Roger Ebert as one of the people who 'discovered' him, and that directly led to his first album (which included the song "Paradise"). But many years before he became a noted journalist and film critic, Rog Ebert (as he was known back then) was a science fiction fan growing up in Urbana, Illinois and the first person in the science fiction genre he ever met was the famous fan and author Wilson "Bob" Tucker – who much later became a good friend of mine.

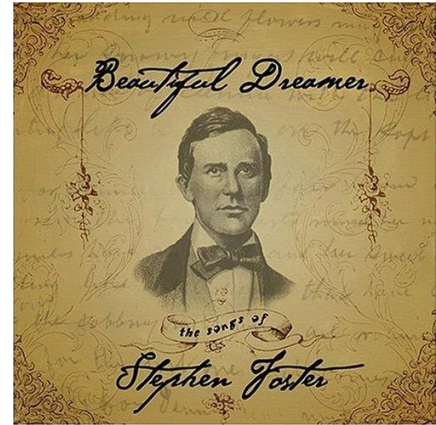
Anyway, I very much like many if not most of John Prine's songs, but perhaps my favorite recording of all by him is a cover of "My Old Kentucky Home" that he did for the 2004 album *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster*. Which is an album that I don't expect very many of you, dear readers, have ever listened to. And you really ought to – it's one of the best compilation tribute albums ever recorded.

Stephen Foster, as we're all probably aware, was America's first professional songwriter. In his short lifetime he wrote more than 200 songs, most of which he sold for a pittance, and he died in poverty in 1864. But his influence on popular music has made him immortal. As one biographer described him, Foster "completely changed the way we think about American culture, musical culture, and musical commerce. ... [In Foster's music] we can find the elements for a country music style, a bluegrass style, a rock style, a jazz style." The great Bob Dylan once described how Foster's music personally influenced him: "Anyone who wants to be a songwriter should listen to as much folk music as they can, study the form and structure of stuff that has been around for 100 years. I go back to Stephen Foster."



my 2011 visit to the gravesite of Stephen Foster

There have been a lot of Stephen Foster tribute albums, but if you do a Google search the one that appears at the top of the first results page is invariably the *Beautiful Dreamer* album. It won the Grammy Award in 2005 for Best Traditional Folk Album, and it is an indication of the eclectic nature of Foster's music that the artists represented on the album run the gamut of musical genres – pop, folk, gospel, classical, country, jazz, blues, and even a few that seem indescribable. And for me there are many highlights: Raul Malo of The Mavericks, who was apparently the mastermind behind the project, starts the album with a very melodic version of the title song. The country group BR549 does a playful version of “Don't Bet Money on the Shanghai”. Mavis Staples gives a powerful gospel version of “Hard Times Come Again No More”. Folk music group Ollabelle sings a 1960s Greenwich Village coffeehouse arrangement of “Gentle Annie”. Canadian folk-fusion group The Duhks put an up-tempo, modernistic, almost Caribbean arrangement on “Camptown Races”. Pop music icon Roger McGuinn does a restrained, straight-up version of “I Dream of Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair” that's evocative of The Byrds from back in 1965.



And then there's John Prine's contribution. His cover of “My Old Kentucky Home” is probably the most time-honored arrangement of any of the 18 songs on the album, all acoustic (including slide guitar) with no percussion. By that point in his life, Prine had undergone throat cancer surgery which had imparted a coarse, somewhat gravelly texture to his voice. But this works very well, as it gives a slightly rough edge that keeps with the hardscrabble Appalachia nature of the song. It's an excellent, very memorable version of an evergreen classic. And it's my second-favorite song on the album.

And my first favorite? That would be from one of the ‘indescribable’ artists – guitarist Henry Kaiser. He took one of Foster's lesser compositions, the instrumental “Autumn Waltz”, and infused it with the sounds of several traditional instruments from the Middle East: the *santour* (fairly close to a hammered dulcimer in sound), the *davul* (a bass drum of sorts), the *toumbak* (a wooden hand drum), and the *riqq* (a type of tambourine). And besides those, there's also an electric guitar, which gradually becomes dominant as the melody evolves from olden times to modern day. It's as if the song is a microcosmic history of music, all in the span of three minutes. Truly remarkable.

So this is my choice for the best tribute album you've probably never listened to. We are all going to miss John Prine, but we've been missing Stephen Foster for the past 156 years. His music, however, still remains and I am grateful that I've had the opportunity to discover and enjoy all of these fine recordings. You should too. ☀

Afterword:

It's probably going to be at least March or maybe even later before the vaccines for COVID-19 that have been developed will finally put an end to this damned plague. One thing I've really missed doing is evening events like theater shows and the occasional reception or party. In fact, I've only rarely been away from home after dark since this whole thing began, and then only to go as far as a nearby shopping center to pick up some Chinese take-out. Except for two times, as you'll see in the next two essays, when I was on the lookout for an unusual visitor.

Night of the Comet

During July we've all been paid a visit by a cosmic interloper which won't return for about 7,000 years – Comet NEOWISE, discovered in late March by a NASA infrared survey space telescope. I hope you all had a chance to look for it – it's been billed as one of the brightest northern hemisphere comets in the past two decades – but it turned out to be a lot more difficult to find (for me, at least) than I'd expected it to be.

The best place for viewing in my neighborhood is the large athletic field at a nearby middle school. It's probably three, maybe even four acres in size – so spacious that I can get far enough away from the tree-lined street to have a pretty good view of the western horizon. About two weeks into July the comet had transitioned over from being a pre-sunrise object to something, just after sunset, that non-early birds like me could look for. So the first clear evening after that I made my way to what I thought was an ideal place on the field for comet-viewing.

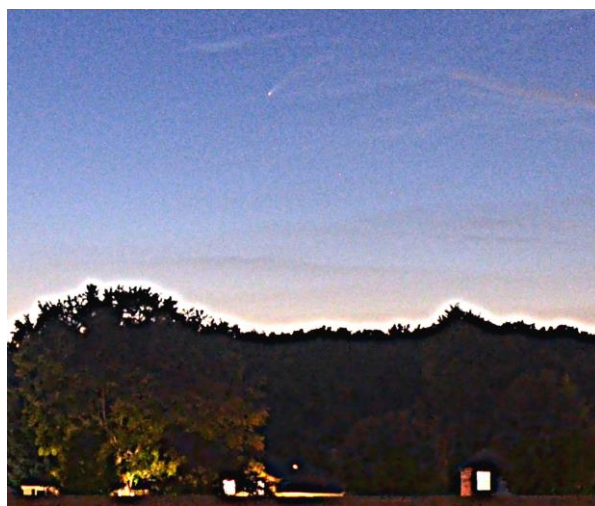


the other skywatchers

It turned out that I wasn't the only one with that same idea. Not long after I got there I was joined by a middle-aged couple who shared a set of binoculars and then, soon after that, by a younger guy who had brought a small telescope with him. I was impressed – all I had with me was my iPhone and an obsolete Nikon digital camera. But I *did* have something they didn't have – a smartphone app which showed me exactly where to look. Not that it did much good, though. As darkness started to set in, about half an hour after sunset, all that was visible was a glowing

horizon in the place where the comet was supposed to be. Half an hour after that it was no better – if there was a comet out there it was a lot fainter than any of us had expected. By then the other three were packing it in, saying they were going to try it again the next week when the comet would be higher up from the horizon and possibly a bit brighter. I stuck it out for another 15 minutes or so, when my optimism had finally waned to the point where a snack and hot cup of tea back home seemed a better option. But before I left, just for the fun of it I took a couple of photos (5-second exposures) of the area of the horizon where that cosmic visitor was supposed to be. And a bit later on, after I had downloaded and post-processed one of them...

There it was! It looked a bit puny based on what my original expectations had been, but after what I had thought was a fruitless evening of skywatching I was actually grateful to have found it at all. But finding it in a photo isn't the same as seeing it, and in a few days I'm gonna try again. Wish me luck! ☀



Comet NEOWISE on July 14th

Late Night of the Comet

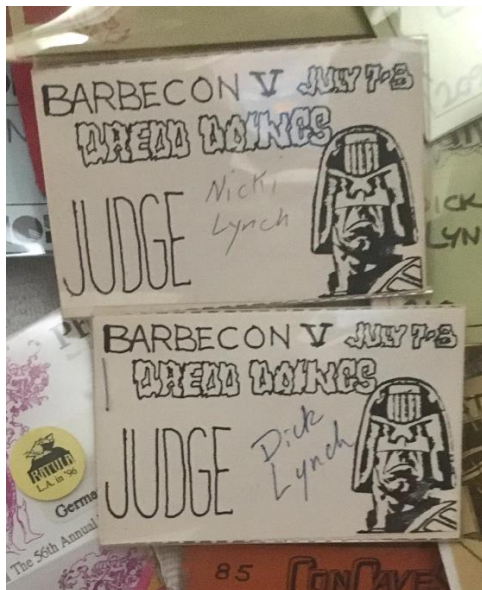
I eventually did take another try at finding Comet NEOWISE, but it was more than a week later. There were, no kidding, nine straight nights where clouds and sometimes even rain made being outside after dark a useless enterprise. It wasn't until July 24th that the evening skies were clear enough for me to take another look and by then orbital motion had taken it higher up and easier to find after sunset. But not brighter. Those ten days had actually brought the comet a bit closer to the Earth. But also a lot farther from the Sun, and that was the bigger difference. I did get a few photos nevertheless, but none of them turned out as good as the one from July 14th. Overall it was a pretty big disappointment, and I'm still waiting for that 'Comet of the Decade'.

It's really been quite a while since we here in the Northern Hemisphere last had a very bright comet to observe. The previous time it happened was way back in 1997 when Hale-Bopp paid us a visit, and it was so spectacularly bright that it was visible to the naked eye for months. And the time before that, back in 1986, there was Halley's Comet.

Like Hale-Bopp, Halley was a naked eye object but it wasn't anywhere near as bright. Worse, for us Northern Hemisphere folk, its period of peak visual magnitude happened during the weeks when it was never very far above the southern horizon in the night sky. But that didn't prevent us intrepid comet-gazers from looking for it, and I can remember one of those times like it was yesterday.



the easy-to-photograph Comet Hale-Bopp



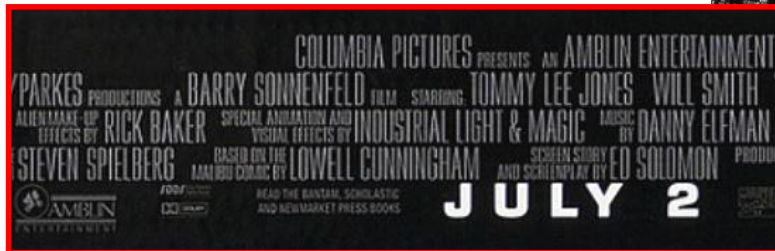
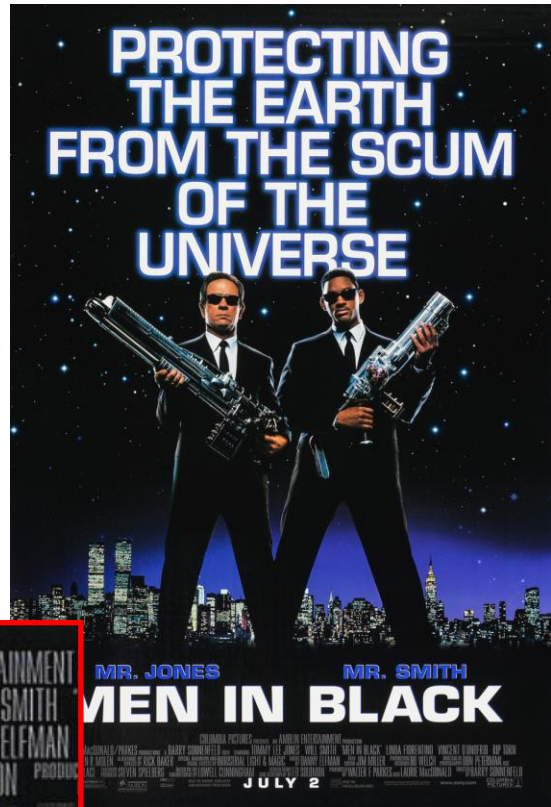
our name badges from the 1986 Barbecon

Back in the 1980s, Nicki and I were living in southeastern Tennessee and had become friends with some of the fans and aspiring writers who were in a Knoxville-area writers group. Two of them, Dorothy Tompkins and Lowell Cunningham, had a nice house in one of K-ville's western suburbs, and every July they hosted a two-day/one-night sleepover for friends that they called 'Barbecon'. The one we attended in the summer of 1986 was a tiny but entertaining media-oriented relax-a-con, featuring good food and several vintage *Doctor Who* episodes. But that far from Knoxville city center the night skies were reasonably dark, so Lowell and I decided we were going to stay up until dawn, if necessary, and look for the comet.

It very nearly took that long. We did the best we could to keep ourselves awake as the night wore on, going outside about once every hour to look for the thing.

It was about four in the morning when we finally spotted it, and by then we were so loopy that it was more of a relief than an accomplishment.

Nicki and I haven't crossed paths very often with Dorothy and Lowell in the 34 years since then, but we do still keep in touch. And while my career path brought Nicki and me from Tennessee to the Washington, D.C. area to work for the U.S. Government, Lowell's took a different direction. About three years after that Barbecon he found success as writer of a six-part comic book series about a clandestine futuristic agency which monitors the activities of space aliens here on Earth: *The Men in Black*. Which, a few years later, became the basis for a hugely popular Steven Spielberg movie. Yeah, he's done okay.



Writing this essay has caused me to want to go back to

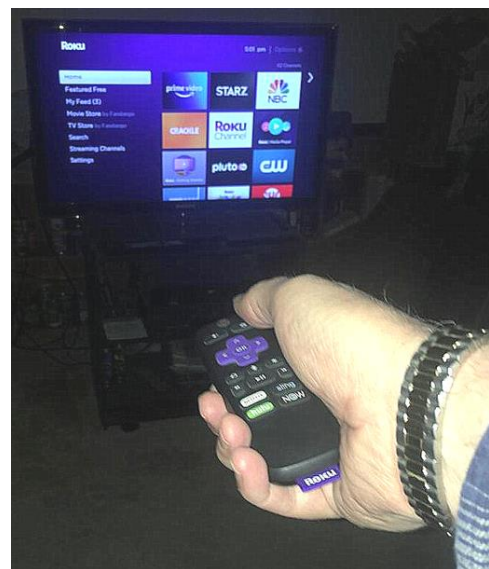
Tennessee for a visit, to connect again with friends from all those years ago. Especially Dorothy and Lowell, who Nicki and I didn't get to see the last time we were there back in 2016. It's something we'll be looking forward to doing. After this pandemic is finally over. ☀

Afterword:

Until the pandemic is finally over, we've used a lot of the time where we'd would have been out and about in public doing other things around the home instead. And one of them is binge watching.

It's been a revelation to discover how much is out there! In just the two services we subscribe to (Amazon Prime and Netflix) there is enough content of interest – TV series and movies – that we'll probably *never* run out of things to watch.

And, of course, there are shows we've already seen which are fun to rediscover. On of them is a half-hour culinary series which has entertained us while also providing educational bits about chemistry, physics, anthropology, and history, as well as some not-so-high drama. And how does it fit all that into a half-hour show? It's... well, you'll see.



So much to watch!

It's complicated!

The pandemic lockdown has created an unprecedented opportunity for TV binge watching, and I suspect we've probably all been doing some of that. For Nicki and me, we've been able to discover good shows like *Bosch* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* which had been lurking about on Amazon Prime for years. And we've also revisited, via the trusty DVR, a few series we'd last seen a long time ago.

One of them is *Good Eats*. It's a half-hour show, hosted by the irrepressibly entertaining Alton Brown, which had aired on Food Network from 1999 to 2012 and is now being re-run on the Cooking Channel at odd times of the day. Every episode was centered around a particular food or meal and often contained an amusing plotline (such as Alton being brow-beaten into making batches of chocolate chip cookies from scratch for his sister Marsha) to go along with lots of useful information about various foodstuffs and how to best use them.

Binge watching the series has allowed us to notice things we'd either missed or ignored the first time around. One of them is the catchphrase that Alton uses whenever he concedes that some dishes take time to complete: "*Your patience will be rewarded.*" Over the duration of the series he said that often. *Very* often. So often that Nicki and I decided that it would make for a good drinking game – every time Alton tosses out that gem of wisdom, slam down a shot of Irish Whiskey. But for purposes of coherent TV watching we only mime doing that: raise a thumb up to the mouth and make a slurping sound.

There's lots of often-repeated catchphrases like that which are embedded into television shows and fiction podcasts. But the one that seems to occur most frequently is an old stand-by which avoids having a character provide tedious, lengthy explanations of trivial minutia. Yeah, *that* one: "*It's complicated.*"

The most egregious use of that catchphrase (that we've noticed, anyway) has been in the otherwise entertaining *Tanis*, a mystery/horror serial podcast from the Public Radio Alliance about a former radio host, Nic Silver, who attempts to track down the myth of Tanis. And in the process runs up against strange, mysterious, and often threatening shadowy organizations. The head of one of them, when confronted by Nic in numerous attempts to find out what's really going on, kept deflecting by telling him, "It's complicated." It happened often throughout the serial. *Very* often. It got so that Nicki and I were waiting in anticipation for when it would occur, and that evolved into the first of our catchphrase virtual drinking games.

This has the potential to get out of control, of course – we're constantly 'discovering' (if that's the right word) new ones, many of them pandemic-related and a few of which are now getting their own mimed Irish Whiskey toasts. One of them occurs often, *very* often, at the beginning of television commercials: "*In these challenging times...*" The next time you hear that, pretend I'm pouring you a virtual shot of Jameson's.

So anyway, it's time to go back to binge-watching *Good Eats*. The show has been revived with new episodes, and Alton is back in all his exuberance. The one tonight is titled "What's Up, Duck?", the IMDB description of which reads: "*Alton reveals how to convert a rock hard duck into a crispy delight while teaching more than you could ever want to know about thermodynamics.*" If you're wondering about that, all I can say is it's... well, you know. ☀

