



My Back Pages 21

Rich Lynch



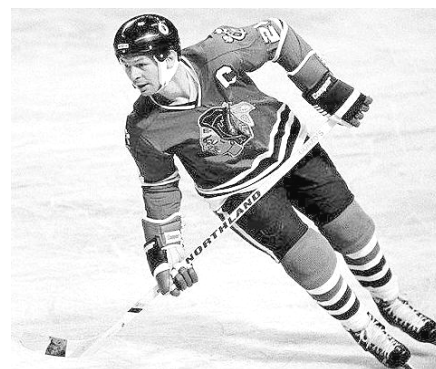
My Back Pages 21

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

This issue, in spite of its number, doesn't have a 'coming of age' theme. Or any particular theme at all, for that matter. So instead I'll take this opportunity to pay homage to some of the famous 21s, and there are a lot of them: Tim Duncan, LaDainian Tomlinson, Tiki Barber, David Pearson, Roger Clemens, Cammi Granato, Zinedine Zidane, David Silva, Philipp Lahm, Warren Spahn, Peter Forsberg, Mike Eruzione, Roberto Clemente, Deion Sanders, Dominique Wilkins, Bill Sharman, Charles Woodson, and a Grammy-winning album by Adele.

And last but not least, here's a shout out to one of my favorite no. 21s – the renowned National Hockey League player Stan Mikita, a former two-time NHL Most Valuable Player who passed away earlier this year. His team, the Chicago Blackhawks, won the Stanley Cup way back in 1961 – thirteen seasons before my local team, the Washington Capitals, even came into existence. And it was just this year, as you will read in the first essay of this collection, that the Caps finally, *finally* ended 44 years of futility.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
December 2018



the great Stan Mikita in action

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

Rockin' the Red	3
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 124 (July 2018)	
On the Road with Gianni and Bhima	4
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 120 (November 2017)	
The UAE and Me	10
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 121 (January 2018)	
In the City of HOPE and LOVE	12
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 122 (March 2018)	
You Never Can Tell	19
previously published in <i>The Drink Tank</i> 402 (June 2018)	
No Spectators	22
not previously published	
The Art of Politic-speak	26
previously published in <i>In Search of Enlightenment</i> (July 23, 2003)	
To the Maxx	27
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 126 (November 2018)	

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.

Rockin' the Red

Forty-four years is a very long time.

It was back in 1974 that I was but a year removed from grad school and just beginning a career that would bring me employment in both private industry and the federal government. It was the year Richard Nixon resigned as U.S. President. It was the year that aerialist Philippe Petit walked a high wire strung between the two World Trade Center towers in New York. It was the year that Hank Aaron surpassed Babe Ruth's career baseball home run record and when Muhammad Ali knocked out George Foreman in the "Rumble in the Jungle". And it was also the year that the Washington Capitals hockey team came into existence.

Back in 1974 they were one sorry bunch of athletes – during their first year in the National Hockey League they won just eight games of the 80 that they played and had by far the worst record in the league. It wasn't until their ninth season that the team even ended up with a winning record. And now, 44 years after their humble beginning, they have finally, at long last, won professional hockey's Holy Grail. The Stanley Cup.



Rockin' the Red at the Caps victory celebration

That happened on June 7th and five days later there was a celebration in Washington which began with a parade down Constitution Avenue and ended with a victory rally on the National Mall. It was big as such things go, with more than 130,000 people there, many dressed in red Capitals jerseys or red championship souvenir tee shirts.



his own private Stanley Cup

I was one of them, though I wasn't wearing a Caps jersey or, for that matter, anything red in color. I'm a Caps fan, and have been for many years, but I wasn't down in D.C. just for that. If it weren't for a technical seminar taking place just a couple of blocks from the parade route, I probably wouldn't have been there at all. But since I was, it was entertaining to take in the spectacle. And there was a lot going on, with double-decker buses carrying the team's players, marching bands, fire engines, bagpipers, and the Budweiser Clydesdales. There even was one guy in the crowd with his own private Stanley Cup. It was made from aluminum foil and he had it securely fastened to his hat. When I asked him about it he told me that a girlfriend had made it for him twenty years ago. That was the previous time the Caps had played in the Stanley Cup final series, but they had been swept four games straight by Detroit. Ever since then he'd been keeping it ready for the greatness he knew would someday come. Now *there's* a true fan!

In the end it was all just a one-day wonder, but nevertheless a memorable one. I hope it won't be another 44 years before the next time D.C. gets to Rock the Red again. ☀

Afterword:

It only takes me a bit more than an hour to get to downtown D.C., but most of my travel for work takes me a lot farther from home than that. A case in point is a trip that happened back in September 2017. I'd originally thought it wouldn't amount to much besides helping to ferry around a delegation of Italian visitors. But it turned out to be a whole lot more.

On the Road with Gianni and Bhima

“Look up ahead. What the heck is *that*?”

It was Bhima who had noticed it. He was driving the big-ass Chevy Suburban we had rented. I was riding shotgun and the three Italians were in the seats behind us. It had been 20 minutes since our ice cream stop in Cumberland and we were up on the plateau about an hour out from Morgantown.

It took me a few seconds to figure out what Bhima was talking about. Back in Cumberland we’d noticed a street sign that indicated we were standing on the corner of George and Harrison Streets, and we’d all been passing the time since then quizzing each other about which George Harrison songs were our favorites. Mine is “Cheer Down” from *Lethal Weapon 2*, which to this day I *still* don’t understand how it missed getting an Oscar nomination. Gianni mentioned that it had been co-written by the great (and sadly, now late) Tom Petty which put all of us on an extended classic rock nostalgia jaunt until Bhima brought us back into the present.



the corner of George and Harrison Streets in Cumberland, Maryland



sun dog over western Maryland
(visible above the truck)

Once I spotted it I knew exactly what it was. A sun dog. It’s actually an atmospheric phenomenon, sometimes visible on mostly clear days when the only clouds are very high and thin cirrus. I can’t say that I’d ever seen one before, though not living on a high plateau where the air is crisper and cleaner probably has something to do with it. It remained visible for the remainder of the drive, though by the time we reached Morgantown the sun was on the horizon.

We’d originally wanted to do more with the afternoon than just the long drive from D.C. to West Virginia. The three Italians were in town to set the stage for possible collaboration in the areas of advanced combustion and carbon capture, and the morning meeting at the Department of Energy had gone so well that we’d been invited to lunch at the Italian Embassy before we hit the road. And *that* had gone so well, with all the side discussions on what might or might not be possible in this highly uncertain era of Make America Great Again, that it was after one o’clock by the time we saw the Washington city limits sign in the rear view mirror. Which left no time for a side trip to see that architectural marvel, Fallingwater. Every time I take an international delegation on a road trip out to the National Energy Technology Laboratory I always have the intention to bring them to see Frank Lloyd Wright’s most famous creation. And, for one reason or another, it never happens. For this trip we had to settle instead for a quick rest stop at the Sideling Hill Exhibit Center, overlooking where 1980s Interstate highway construction had unearthed a magnificent geologic syncline. The Center was not even close to being an architectural marvel, but at least we got to see the oldest rock in Maryland.



the oldest rock in Maryland

“Man, you guys do some outrageous hours! I saw you going out the door as I was leaving for home this morning.”

That was how the graveyard shift manager of the Residence Inn in Morgantown greeted us as we dragged ourselves inside after a very long day trip to Pittsburgh. It was just after midnight and we’d been on the road for about 17 hours. But it was a *good* 17 hours.

It didn’t start out that way. In the past couple of years I have become more and more comfortable in trusting myself to Siri for plotting a route from Point A to Point B – road atlas, thy name is iPhone. But for this trip, three different routes were presented as options and of course we chose the most convoluted one.

I’m not sure what our thinking was, other than “avoid the Interstate, which likely will be crammed with rush hour traffic”. So we instead took a more bucolic route which had almost no traffic, but also no real indication that we were approaching where we wanted to go. By the time we got within ten miles of the Pittsburgh branch of the National Lab, it was still mostly farmland with patches of wilderness. Five miles out we were routed through a maze of curved and hilly roads that snaked through a residential area. Just as I was beginning to seriously doubt that Siri really knew what she was doing, there appeared the Lab’s back gate. When the guy at the Lab we were meeting found out we’d taken the back roads to get there, he gave us an incredulous look and asked, “Why did you do *that*? When I drive down to Morgantown and back I *always* take the Interstate.” Bhima sheepishly looked over at me and shrugged.

The Italian initiative is actually Bhima’s responsibility, as he is the program manager for the technical stuff within the Department of Energy that the Italians were interested in. I, on the other hand, am the International Activities Advisor/Liaison for our collaborations with European countries, which has brought me to Norway several times in the past few years. And also to Italy, but not for this initiative. No, for the purposes of this visit I was merely a facilitator. And that’s not necessarily a trivial thing – good things quite often happen once you get the right people talking to the right people, and the times it does (as appeared to be happening) you get a sense of accomplishment. Gianni is my counterpart from the Italian side and from his broad smile I’m guessing he was probably thinking the same thing as me: “We have a way forward!”

We were out of there by mid-afternoon, but not before I paid my respects to some fallen comrades. Back on September 8, 1994, a terrible plane crash near Pittsburgh took the lives of nine National Lab people, four of whom were good friends. There’s a small granite slab memorial just outside the building where we were meeting and I took the opportunity during a break to go there and remember some of the pleasant times I’d shared with them before that awful day. As I departed, I patted the top of the memorial. “Miss you guys,” I said. “I’ll bend an elbow for you later on.”



the Flight 427 Memorial at the National Lab

“What a great view!”

Gianni and his two compatriots said that several times – well, twice anyway – as we looked down at Pittsburgh from atop Mount Washington. And come to think of it, I probably did too. As scenic vistas of cities go, this one ranks way up there. In more ways than one! We’d had enough time left in the day where we could find something interesting to do, so we’d opted to drive into the city. The Lab is located a dozen miles south of the city center and all the way in we kicked around possibilities on what to do with the car when we got there – Pittsburgh, for all its scenic grandeur, is a *terrible* place to try to find on-street parking.



the splendid view from Mount Washington

The best idea turned out to be the most obvious one. Our route took us right past Station Square, a shopping and entertainment complex just across the Monongahela River from downtown. It turned out there was oodles of inexpensive parking there and better yet, it was only a short distance from the inclined railway at the base of Mount Washington.



Gianni capturing the view of downtown Pittsburgh during the funicular ride up the mountain

“I’m a big fan of funiculars,” I told Bhima and Gianni on the walk over to the ticket window. “I’ve ridden on *lots* of them in various parts of the world.”

“Oh yeah? How many?” Bhima asked.

I thought for a moment. “Six.”

Gianni rolled his eyes. “There are many more than that just in Italy!”

I opined that Gianni probably hadn’t ridden on very many of them, seeing as how he lives on the island of Sardinia. He didn’t respond, but from the number of photos he took while the railway car climbed the mountain I’m guessing that was reasonably close to the truth.

We’d intended to find a place to eat and watch the sun set, but none of the restaurants up there were open for dinner yet. So we settled for beer instead. It was a typical sports bar – so loud that it was hard to hear anybody farther away than about three feet. I offered a toast “to absent friends” – and it might have been my imagination, but it seemed that the surrounding din then slightly lessened as if people in there paused for half a second of respect before resuming their conversations. Gianni looked at me and raised his eyebrows but that was as much an inquiry as he made. We all nursed our beers in silence for a few minutes, then Bhima banged his mug down on the table and said, “Okay, let’s go see some baseball!”

“Where are the ticket scalpers when you need them?”

That was my observation as we tried to figure out on which side of the PNC Park the ticket office was located. By the time we reached the ballpark, after a dinner stop in the city, it was an hour after the game had begun. And by then, all the ticket scalpers had given up and gone away.

By the time we finally had gotten seated we’d missed the big highlight of the game – a grand slam home run by one of the Pirates’ best players. But that wasn’t the only homer of the game, and when an opposing Orioles player hit one we got to witness what I think is about a 9 out of 10 on the ultimate home team fan allegiance scale. The outfield grandstand, where the home run came down, is located only a very short distance from the Allegheny River (in fact, there was a glorious view of downtown Pittsburgh, across the river, from where we were sitting). The Pirates fan who caught the ball turned around and with a mighty heave, threw it into the river! About the only thing that could be more awesome than that would have been if he’d had the Pirates logo tattooed on his butt and had mooned everybody.



our view of Pittsburgh from the ballpark

All this excitement as well as the tantalizing aroma of cooked meat which had been wafting down to where we were sitting had re-stoked my appetite, so I took a short break to the concourse in search of a bratwurst. What I found was a kiosk where some guy was selling lots of different kinds of tube steaks. He had everything from smoked jalapeño pepper jack chicken sausages to portobello bacon sausages, and even some hot dogs – but no brats! In desperation, I looked around and saw someone eating what looked like a brat so I asked the vendor what it was.

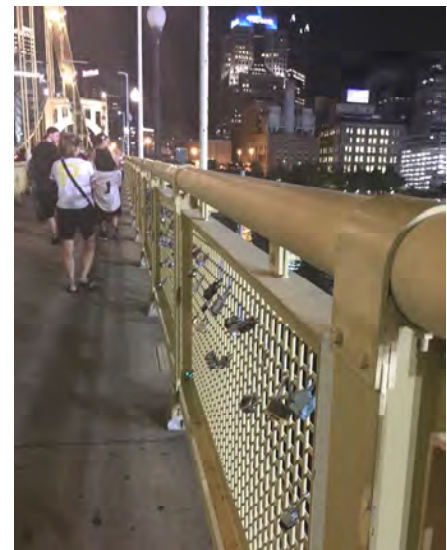
“That? It’s a sweet Italian sausage. Really good covered with grilled onions and peppers!”

“Okay, I’ll take one of those,” I said.

“Just one?” He took my money and handed me the beast. It was overflowing with toppings.

I looked over at him just before taking a big bite. “I’m on a diet.”

The Pirates had been on a scoring spree, so come the 7th inning we had decided we’d seen enough and headed back toward where the car was parked. The long walk took us over a suspension bridge near the ballpark, and mid-span we came across an unexpected sight – hundreds of locks of all kinds attached to the latticework bridge railing.



some of the hundreds locks attached to the railing of the bridge

I mentioned to Gianni that I'd actually seen that kind of thing before, back in 2007, on the Ponte Vecchio bridge over the Arno River in Florence, Italy. "It's supposed to be a tradition that young men, to show their undying love for their sweethearts, attach padlocks to the bridge railing and throw the keys into the river."

That got Bhima's attention. "Really?"

"Yup," I said. "But there's more to it. True love may be everlasting but the padlocks are not. The city maintenance workers cut them off every evening."

"I knew that," Gianni responded. And then he smiled. "Maybe."

And with that, the Pittsburgh part of the trip was over. But Houston still awaited.

"You'd never know there had been a hurricane."

I said that to the host of our visit to one of the project sites. He replied, "Not here anyway, but there are probably high water marks on some of the highway underpasses."

Following the day in Pittsburgh we'd had another half day of meetings at the National Lab's other campus, in Morgantown, before we climbed back into the big Suburban one last time for the drive north to the Pittsburgh airport. One last time for me and the three Italians, anyway. I wasn't going to miss that monster, but Bhima was still stuck with it. He had to stay in the Pittsburgh area for a technical workshop while Team Italy and I headed south to Texas.

We'd somewhat naively scheduled visits to two different projects for the single day we were there, neglecting the famous adage that 'Things are bigger in Texas!' On the map, it didn't look all that far from our hotel at the airport to the first project site, southwest of the city. Or all that much of a drive from there to the second project site, to the southeast of Houston. But it was, and we were constantly bumping up against time constraints to make sure we not only got to the project sites when we'd said we would, but to also find time for lunch.

The day we were in Houston was just about one month after Hurricane Harvey had paid the area a very soggy visit. There were clouds, but it all seemed pretty pleasant to me. When I asked our meeting host at the first project site if the weather was usually this nice, he just snickered. "Nah."



Gianni's photo of me during the first project site visit

"We are going to get wet."

Gianni made that comment while we were driving toward the second project site. By late afternoon the coastal Texas rain had arrived, but it was pop-up showers rather than a storm front. This had hastened our walk-through of the project, which had reminded me of the old saw on how long it takes to walk from the city center in Florence over to the train station: 15 minutes, or 10 minutes when it's raining.

Gianni and his two compatriots, when they realized they were going to have a couple of free hours that afternoon, had thought about going in to Houston city center to walk around and then find dinner somewhere. But it quickly became obvious to them that there was a much better and much closer option. The Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, it turned out, was only about a ten mile drive from the project site.

It took less than 15 minutes to get there, and I was amazed at how abruptly the area changed – we went from petrochemical industry to generic commercial to mixed residential-commercial to upscale waterfront development (some still under construction from what we observed). And just beyond that was the Space Center. We’d had some trouble finding the second project site due to its inconspicuous location – there was a lone small sign that directed visitors onto a single-lane dirt road. But no such problem for the Space Center – just as I was telling Gianni to be on the lookout for it, he pointed and said, “You mean that place over there with the Space Shuttle on top of the airplane?” Subtle.

And that was pretty much it for the road trip. We said our good-byes but I lingered for just a bit – I’d really, *really* wanted to go in there with them but there just wasn’t enough time. I had an early evening flight back to D.C., and the airport was all the way on the other side of Houston. I’d seen enough of the city’s rush hour traffic that morning on the way to the first project site that there was *no way* I was going to push my luck by getting into a time squeeze.



at the Johnson Space Center just before parting ways with Team Italy

But *their* flight home wasn’t until the next morning and during the entirety of my drive back to the airport I was mentally kicking myself for not making the same arrangements.

Gianni later emailed me that he and his compatriots had a very enjoyable though hurried couple of hours taking in as much of the place as they could before closing time. And he also let me know that a follow-up meeting was in the works for next year on Sardinia. No space shuttles there, he wrote, but the island is *filled* with other kinds of scenic wonders. It’s also a place I’ve never been to and *if* a stopover there can be combined with another unrelated trip that’s already being planned, I’m gonna be all over it.

I decided I was going to be optimistic, and my reply to him consisted of just three words: “Count me in!” ☀

Afterword:

Ah, the best laid plans... It turned out that a trip to Sardinia was not in my future, a victim of the bean counters. (Ironically, I did travel to Italy in 2018 though for an entirely different reason. But more about that another time.) I had two much longer trips 2017, for carbon sequestration conferences that I helped to organize, that were both to the United Arab Emirates. It was the second one, in early December, that included a pretty good day for me.

The UAE and Me

All in all it was a pretty good birthday. Lots of good camaraderie during the day, a shout-out at the end of the day's meeting by the chairlady, and then a nice dinner with friends. And beer. Several of them. It would have been nice to have been close to home for some of the festivities, but home was several thousand miles away. I was in Abu Dhabi.

The roll-up for this meeting had been going on for much of the year. It was another of the multilateral carbon sequestration events, this time involving Energy Ministers from some of the organization's member countries which had added considerably to the overall



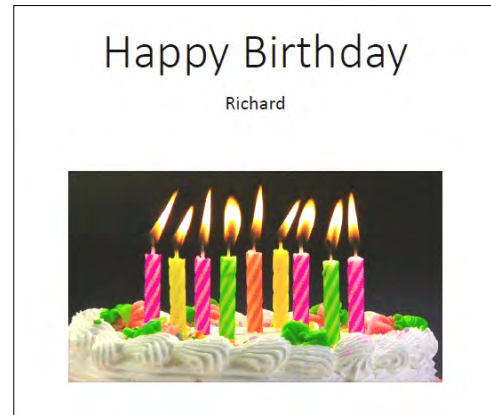
Brian and Andrew at the
UAE National Day celebration

I never managed to get farther than about a five minute walk from the hotel.

So instead, Abu Dhabi found me. It turned out that my first full day in the United Arab Emirates was its National Day – the 46th anniversary of the unification of seven shiekhdoms which had collectively been a British protectorate into an independent country. That evening the broad promenade walkway adjacent to the hotel became filled with booths and displays that celebrated the country's history and culture. My friends Brian and Andrew, from the meeting, helped me explore it all. The highlight was a group of Arabic chanters, accompanied by drummers, who drew a large crowd for the 15 minutes they were featured. And by the time they were finished we decided it was dinner time.



Arabic chanters at the National Day celebration



a PowerPoint birthday shout-out to me at
the Technical Group meeting

degree of difficulty in the planning process. For me, the first two days of the meeting were the ones where I was most involved, as I am the organization's Secretariat for both the Projects task force (chaired by an Australian) and the Technical Group (chaired by a Norwegian). But I was also the go-to guy for making sure all of the logistical details for the overall event were under control – things like delegate seating charts and agenda updates – and this kept me busy inside the meeting venue hotel when others were taking time to find some of what Abu Dhabi had to offer. So much so that for the entirety of my five days there

It would have been nice to discover what downtown Abu Dhabi was like, not only in terms of the city's attractions but also its cuisine. But the venue hotel was situated on an island across an inlet from the center of the city and there was no obvious way for pedestrians to cross over – the three highway bridges looked to be expressways with the nearest one to the hotel under construction. So instead we were limited by what we could find close to the hotel. And where we ended up was Greek.



I'm not sure what decided us

on that particular restaurant. Price probably had something to do with it – Abu Dhabi is certainly not an inexpensive place to visit – but it turned out that none of us had been to a Greek restaurant lately and as we all know, Life is Betta with Feta!



view of downtown Abu Dhabi, across the inlet, from inside the hotel

It was Brian who ended up with the biggest meal – so much that he was more than a bit surprised by the amount of food and how it was served. It took a while for us to consume it all, and when we were finally done the restaurant's owner came over to chat. We informed him of the overall excellence of his food and when he asked if there was any way he could improve we told him to put some Greek beer on the menu – we'd had to settle for Peronis instead – and he said he was working on that and to come back again in another month. When I told him that was not going to be possible for me and that I might not in fact *ever* be back to this part of the world, he just clapped me on the back. "Think positive!" he said.



some of Brian's Greek feast



a gift from the hotel

The night of my birthday, when I returned to my room, I discovered that the hotel had left me a gift – a small birthday cake and a bottle of champagne. (I guess they really *do* read passport information.) I re-gifted the champagne to my UAE counterpart, who had abided with numerous requests from me during the roll-up to the meeting. But I ate the cake myself – I considered it a good end to a good meeting. And you know what? It's not completely out of the question that I could someday pass this way again. There's no harm in being positive about it. ☀

Afterword:

The best trips of all are, of course, vacations. And every January, my wife Nicki and I start the new year off right with a trip to New York City. We've been doing this since 2009, and in that time we've experienced dozens of Broadway shows, museums galore, and this past year, as you will read, one very nasty blizzard.

In the City of HOPE and LOVE

We are not “HOPE”less

Well, we’d been looking for the “LOVE” sculpture but what we found was even more interesting.

Back in the 1960s, artist Robert Indiana designed a primary-colors image of the word LOVE, with the letters ‘LO’ stacked on top of ‘VE’. It was originally created for a 1964 Christmas card for New York City’s Museum of Modern Art but in 1973 it became immortalized as a pop art icon when the United States Postal Service put it on an 8-cent stamp. It was inevitable that the image would become

transmogrified into a sculpture, and that’s what happened – first for the Indianapolis Museum of Art (in 1970), and then for permanent display in other cities. Back in 2001, Nicki and I

discovered one of them in downtown Philadelphia and had naively assumed that it was a one-off original. It wasn’t until late last year, when we were leafing through the pages of a 2018 New York City calendar we had just purchased, that we found out that there is also one of them in Manhattan. So on a very cold morning in early January, the first full day of our annual New York City mini-vacation, we went off in search of it.

But what we happened across instead was a different Robert Indiana sculpture, a duplicate of one (for obvious reasons) titled “HOPE” that had been created in 2008 and displayed in Denver during the Democratic National Convention in support of the Obama presidential campaign. The copy in New York is apparently one of many. I later read that it had been there for more than three years but we never knew about it until we saw it on our chilly walk up 7th Avenue. But then, there’s *always* stuff to discover in New York.



the 1973 "LOVE" postage stamp



what we found at the corner of
7th Avenue and 53rd Street

It’s da bomb

I remember thinking, as we were walking away from the “HOPE” sculpture, that I *hoped* the dire weather forecast for later in the week wasn’t what we’d actually experience. But that was not to be. Thursday, January 4th, brought an unwelcome visitor to the city – something called a ‘bomb cyclone’.

I’d never heard that term before and at first had thought the TV weather guys were making it up. But it’s only too real. The official term is ‘explosive cyclogenesis’ or ‘bombogenesis’ and is what occurs when a low pressure system’s central pressure falls precipitously over a 24 hour period. What resulted was high winds and lots of snow – in other words, a blizzard. A bad one.

From our hotel window, 37 stories above Times Square, it all looked a bit ethereal – a whitish haze of snow blowing sideways. But down at street level it was a far different experience. New Yorkers being who they are, there were plenty of them on the sidewalks but it was tough going. People were slipping and sliding, and the wind kept trying to rip away hats and scarves. Brutal.



the view from our hotel window on the day of the bomb cyclone

Nicki and I had planned to go see the Brooklyn Museum that day but were dissuaded by what we heard when we called there to see how long – of if – it would be open. Instead, we didn't stray very far from our hotel. But even so there were still some sights to behold. Most of the businesses on 7th Avenue looked like they were just hunkering down until the snow subsided but there was one place where Zen-like performance art was going on – someone operating a motorized rotary sweeper in a vain attempt to keep a stretch of sidewalk cleared. Up and back he went like a Zamboni, working his way toward the street curb. By the time he finally reached it the storm had deposited enough new snow on the sidewalk near the building that he had to start over again. We thought it very Sisyphean.

On the way back from a lunch excursion up 7th Avenue I stopped to take a photo of Times Square from just a half block to the north. On a clear day it would have been easy to see the crystalline ball atop the tall building at the south end of the square which less than a week earlier had dropped down to bring in the New Year. But from the middle of the bomb cyclone it was a mostly featureless gray haze. The bright red TKTS booth at the north end of the square was hardly even visible. What I could mostly make out of it was a mass of people milling around in their quest to purchase discounted tickets to Broadway shows. As we would soon be doing.



the view toward Times Square amid the bomb cyclone

American Actress / Parisian Woman

With all the Broadway shows we've attended over the past decade it's been inevitable that we've re-visited some of the theatres where they're staged. But there are still venues we've never been into and for this trip we checked three off the list, one of them (on the evening of the bomb cyclone) the Hudson Theatre on West 44th Street.

It's the newest addition to Broadway's pantheon of theatres and had been open as such (after a two year refurbishment) only since the beginning of 2017. The building has been in existence for more than a century, in previous decades serving as a radio and television studio (including being home to *The Tonight Show* in the Jack Paar and Steve Allen years), a night club, a movie theater, and even corporate event space. But before all that the Hudson had originally *opened* as a theatre, back in 1903, with the great American actress Ethel Barrymore starring in a now-obscure play titled *Cousin Kate*. The show that we attended featured another great American actress – Uma Thurman in *The Parisian Woman*.

The title makes the play sound like a period piece of some kind but it's actually set in present-day Washington D.C. Which places it right in the middle of the political fiasco that is the Trump administration. Ms. Thurman plays the Francophile wife of a prominent Washington lawyer who is being considered, by the President, for appointment to a seat on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. And she is also the friend of a well-known economist (played by the eminent Blair Brown) who has just been nominated to be the next head of the Federal Reserve and may be able to sway the President's opinion on who should be a Circuit Court Justice – because, as we all know by now, Donald Trump makes decisions based on advice of the very last person who gets in to talk to him. But this is all subtext – the play, to me, was a fascinating exploration of the limits to how far someone could or should go to achieve a career goal such as a political appointment. And also where the limits are between friendship and clever manipulation in order to get there.

I was a bit surprised when I later discovered that the theatre critics did not seem overly enamored of *The Parisian Woman* – the guy from the *New York Times*, for instance, thought the play seemed overly “trapped in Trump-land” – but Nicki and I liked it a lot. It was exactly the right length – an hour-and-a-half with no intermission – and the script was so clever and cutting, with plenty of intrigue and several different surprises, that it more than offset any contriviness that the critics were railing against. I'd certainly want to go see it again if it makes its way to a regional theatre in these parts.



outside the Hudson Theatre on West 44th Street



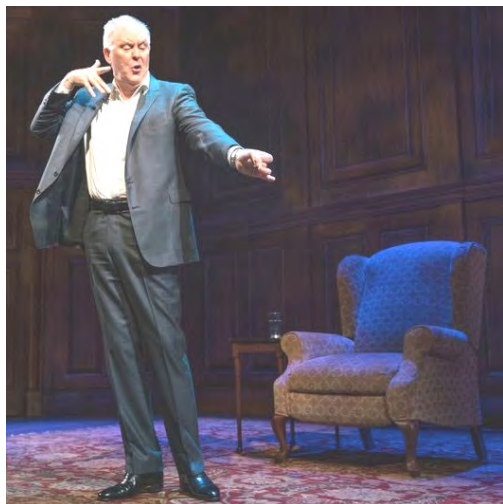
Uma Thurman and Blair Brown in
The Parisian Woman

Stories by Lithgow

An even better play, in my opinion, was the one matinee we attended – John Lithgow’s *Stories by Heart*. It’s an updated version of a one-man show that Lithgow has been doing for several years, a performance of two of his favorite short stories. But it’s also a personal remembrance of how he came to appreciate the written word during his childhood from bedtime readings by his father, a thespian who had founded several theater companies in Ohio. And how, decades later, when his father was bedridden and near the end of his life, Lithgow was able to break him out of a downward cycle of despondency by reading one of those same stories to him.

I’ve been to one-man enactments before (a good one of *A Christmas Carol* is staged every December at the regional theatre in Olney, Maryland), and it becomes clear pretty quickly that such a show isn’t meant to be an adaptation of a story – it *is* the story. The actor becomes so subsumed into the various characters of the story that the show, in effect, becomes an illuminated manuscript.

That’s what happened while Lithgow was on stage, and the two stories he chose for this show were in stark contrast. The first act was taken up by Ring Lardner’s superb 1925 short story “Haircut”, a monolog by a small-town barber in rural Michigan, told to a waiting customer, about one of the local residents who had recently died in a hunting incident. It starts out like a fond remembrance of a good guy, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that the ‘good’ guy wasn’t so virtuous. By the end, the tale has regressed into adultery, misogyny, and murder, and the tale-teller has morphed from being friendly and avuncular into eerily creepy. I can see why Lithgow chose this story for the show – it allows him to display his impressive acting ability throughout a broad range of characterization in only a relatively short amount of time.



John Lithgow on stage in *Stories by Heart*



outside the American Airlines Theatre
on a chilly Wednesday afternoon

The story he chose for the second act, the one that he read to his ailing father, was more challenging as there were many characters (including a parrot), and all of them British – P.G. Wodehouse’s comic “Uncle Fred Flits By”. I didn’t enjoy it *quite* as much, not because of the performance but due to the source material – I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that I’ve never been a Wodehouse enthusiast. But overall, this is certainly a gem of a play. At least in my opinion. The theatre critics, however, weren’t as kind, likening it to an acting masterclass but a bit lacking in substance. Only the *New York Times* critic praised it because of its uncontrived ability to breathe new life into old stories. Hey, this time he got it right!

The Museum of Eclecticity

The other three shows we saw during this mini-vacation were also worthy, but didn't rise quite so highly in my esteem. The best of these, for me at least, was one of the musicals – *Miss Saigon*, which we saw on our first night in town. The story, a 1970s version of *Madame Butterfly* set in the chaos of the final days of the Vietnam War, tells a tale of doomed romance and self-sacrifice, made all the more compelling by some really good performances and songs. The other musical, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, was also good and even featured one of our favorite Broadway actors, Christian Borle. But Nicki really liked *The Play That Goes Wrong*, a farce about what happens when a novice collegiate drama society attempts to stage a very British whodunit mystery that proves to be way, way beyond their capabilities. There were sight gags galore, crashing sets, malfunctioning props, and overmatched stage crew members for this play-within-a-play, sometimes involving people in the audience. For me, highly entertaining – yes; but a bit too much over the top – probably.



outside the Broadway Theatre on
Tuesday, January 2nd



the Brooklyn Museum from the subway entrance

And we did, finally, make it to the Brooklyn Museum. But on a *very* cold day. After the bomb cyclone departed the scene, one of those dreaded polar vortexes moved in with below-freezing temperatures and a nasty, brisk wind. It made us grateful that the no. 3 subway line dropped us off just a few hundred feet from the museum's entrance.

My first impression, upon emerging from the subway station, was, "Wow, this place is *huge*!"

And it is – in physical size

it's the third largest museum in the city. And my next impression, once we were inside, was "There's *a lot* to see here!" The Brooklyn Museum is ostensibly an art museum but there's much more there than that. For example, there is a large and extensive collection of Egyptian antiquities, including stone statues, metal jewelry and artifacts, and papyrus fragments – all of which date as far back as 3,500 years. This had been augmented by a special exhibit titled "Soulful Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt" which not only displayed dozens of animal mummies, it also provided probably too much information on the techniques and rituals of animal mummification. We found it pretty interesting, but were maybe also a little bit creeped out.



statue of an Egyptian nobleman and
his family (ca. 2400 BC)

The Brooklyn Museum for a seven year period in the 1990s and 2000s was known as the Brooklyn Museum of Art and for good reason. Its permanent collection includes an extensive amount of American art featuring notables such as John Singer Sargent, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Winslow Homer, as well as an excellent representation of classical European Renaissance art. And a bit more than a decade ago it opened the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which is intended to be “a nexus for feminist art, theory, and activism”. Part of this space is occupied by a remarkable extended work of installation art from the 1970s by American artist Judy Chicago titled “Roots of The Dinner Party: History in the Making”.

It’s been described as “the first epic feminist artwork” which “functions as a symbolic history of women in Western civilization” and that’s probably true. It consists of ornate and decorative place settings for 39 prominent women, arranged around a large triangular table. Each place setting is different, and includes a chalice and painted china platter set upon an equally ornate and unique table runner. Honorees are



the "Roots of The Dinner Party" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum

represented from the mythical (such as Ishtar and Kali), the middle-ages (with Eleanor of Aquitaine and Saint Brigid of Kildare), and the more recent past (including Sacajawea, Sojourner Truth, and Susan B. Anthony). The exhibit is intended to “celebrate women’s achievements in Western culture” while “combating the absence of women from mainstream historical narratives” and “blazing the trail for feminist art historical methodologies in an era of social change”. I can’t say if that goal was met, but it *was* certainly an impressive display of exquisite craftsmanship. And also a colorful respite against the backdrop of a drab and cold winter day.

I came away very impressed at just how eclectic the Brooklyn Museum was, in terms of what was on display. A large alcove just off the main entrance was filled with bronze castings in an exhibition titled “Rodin at the Brooklyn Museum: The Body in Bronze” that marked the 100th anniversary of the death of that famous sculptor. “The Thinker” was not among them but some other famous castings were, including “The Burghers of Calais”. This was augmented by a really informative video about how bronze castings like these are made.



three of the six Burghers of Calais and other Rodin castings



modern dance in the Beaux-Arts Court of the Brooklyn Museum

And it turned out there was even some performance art, of sorts. The interior of the Brooklyn Museum is dominated by its Beaux-Arts Court, a two-story skylighted space with large archways and a glass tile floor. It's a perfect place for instructional activities, and near the end of our visit to the museum we looked out over the mezzanine railing on what appeared to be a class in modern dance that was in progress there. They all looked like they were having a pleasant time of it. As were we. It had been a good day.

The Sculpture on 6th Avenue

We eventually did locate the Robert Indiana "LOVE" sculpture. It's on 6th Avenue at 55th Street, not all that far actually from a building that we absolutely went out of our way to avoid – the Trump Tower. Not a whole lot of love has been coming out of *that* place! Instead, we strolled south to Rockefeller Center to see and enjoy the very last vestige of the holiday season – the big Christmas tree in the plaza overlooking the ice rink. We knew that it, like some of the Broadway shows we saw during our four-day stay, would be coming down soon. But we also knew there would be replacements to see and enjoy next January when we're back again. It's a continuous cycle that we hope to keep experiencing for years to come – because we really LOVE New York. ☀



at the "LOVE" sculpture

Afterword:

Our next mini-vacation in New York City is now only about a month away as I'm writing this, and the game plan won't be much different from this time – five Broadway shows and at least one museum visit in the four days we're there. But hopefully no repeat of the bomb cyclone!

There was an interesting coda to this chilly visit to the Big Apple. About a week after we got back, I was describing the trip to a friend at work and he asked about a Broadway show that we didn't get to see. (And which we won't, as it closes before the end of December.) It caused me to do a web search, which led to a trip down memory lane. And also the following essay.

You Never Can Tell

You never can tell what you'll find on the Internet that'll end up leading you on a trip down memory lane. Hey, let's be honest about it – it happens to most of us and probably more often than we'd like to admit. I had been telling a friend about my wife Nicki's and my early January mini-vacation in New York City, and he asked if we had tried to get tickets for *Springsteen on Broadway*. My answer was no – the show was in hiatus the week we were there. But just for the fun of it, I did a web search to see if tickets would even have been available and the answer, to no surprise, turned out to be: Not a Chance. Bruce is doing that one man show through the middle of December and every performance is sold out.

But during that Internet search I came across something that took me back more than 30 years – a photo of a souvenir tee shirt from Bruce's "Born in the



back of the "Born in the U.S.A."
souvenir tee shirt

U.S.A." world tour of 1984-85. The front of the shirt depicts the iconic "Pink Cadillac" that was the title of one of his songs from back then, while the back shows the names of the cities where the tour touched down. Most of them seem pretty obvious – places like Cleveland, Toronto, Tokyo, Paris, and London – but about halfway through the list there's one city that I doubt many people would otherwise recognize: Murfreesboro.

It's located at the exact geographical center of Tennessee and is the home of Middle Tennessee State University. Murfreesboro is only about a 35 mile drive down Interstate 24 from Nashville, and back in the 1980s the Country Music Capital of the World did not have a suitable venue which could accommodate large indoor concerts. But MTSU did – its Athletic Center, which had been designed with really good acoustics. And that's where Bruce and his E Street Band played.

Back in 1984, Nicki and I were living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and I was employed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. I worked as a project engineer which often took me up to one of TVA's power plants in the coal fields of western Kentucky, and the route to get there brought me right past Murfreesboro. It was on a chilly Friday evening, November 16th, as I was passing through Nashville on my way back home from a week on the road, I heard on one of the Nashville rock music radio stations that Springsteen would be playing a December 9th tour date at MTSU and that tickets would go on sale in Murfreesboro the next morning.



Springsteen on Broadway
at The Walter Kerr Theatre

What followed was a night that severely tested my endurance. I found a pay phone and called Nicki, telling her I wouldn't be home that night, and by the time I reached MTSU's Athletics Center a lengthy queue had already formed. After I took my place in line it continued to grow and grow, extending all the way down the side of the building and around the corner. In another hour the tail end of the line emerged from around the opposite corner. And all the while the temperature kept dropping.



MTSU's Murphy Athletic Center

I wasn't nearly as prepared as were many of the others in line – I had only a medium-weight jacket with a lightweight hat and no gloves. And also no food. But that didn't mean there *wasn't* any food – as time went on a camaraderie developed among people in line, where snacks were shared and your place in line was saved when you had to go use the restroom. Inevitably, standing in line became a spectator activity in itself. Just down the hill at an athletic field we observed a high school football playoff game being played, with the local team eventually emerging victorious. (To this day that has been the only football game that I have ever seen in person.) And every so often there was a mini-drama where something happened that caused voices elsewhere in the line to be angrily raised until somebody interceded as peacemaker. Some of that was no doubt alcohol-fueled – I saw many empty beer cans and even a few bourbon bottles – and in the morning there was one guy who appeared to be sleeping it off as the line wended past him.

I ended up getting three tickets, pretty good seats, two of them for Nicki and me and one for a contractor friend from California who was a big Springsteen fan. I had enough money for more yet – they were a *very* affordable \$16



each – but when I had called a couple of close friends in Chattanooga from a nearby pay phone to tell them about it they decided to take a pass. I remember being absolutely stunned.

Including Nicki and me, there were more than 11,000 people who were at that concert on December 9th. And it was a long one – two sets plus an encore, 29 songs total – lasting more than four hours. He opened the show with a bombastic version of “Born in the U.S.A.” that supercharged the crowd and ended it with a playful version of “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”, which sent us all home in a pleasant warm glow. But, for me, everything else in between I had remembered as a dense kaleidoscopic mix of sight and sound. That is, until I found the complete set list online – Bruce's fan base is obsessively and relentlessly completist – which brought back more memories on how it all happened. But it's still all somewhat disjointed – there was sensory overload being in that arena for the concert, and what I have left are a lot of bits and pieces.

I'd often wondered if there were any notables in the crowd that night, and I'm sure there must have been several. But in my Internet search I could find record of only one – the famous rock-country singer and songwriter Steve Earle, whose breakthrough 1986 album *Guitar Town* was listed by *Rolling Stone* magazine (in 2012) as one of the 500 greatest albums of all time. He

came away so inspired that he went home and wrote most of the songs for the album. Makes me wonder if he was anywhere near me in line on that cold November night.

It has now been 34 years – fully half a lifetime for me – since Nicki and I attended that extraordinary concert. And for Bruce as well, as he and I are separated in age by only a few months. Since then Bruce has released eleven studio albums, eight compilation albums, five concert albums, and six boxed sets. That’s a lot of music! If there are any regrets I have from my concert experience, it’s that in all of that subsequent music there are many songs I wish I could have seen him perform – originals like “Murder Incorporated”, “Blood Brothers”, and “This Hard Land”, and covers such as the excellent one he did of Chuck Berry’s “You Never Can Tell”. That December 1984 concert was the one and only time I’ve ever, or probably *will* ever, see Bruce live – tickets to his shows are invariably either unavailable or else only obtainable at totally unreasonable prices from ticket resellers. But in this Brave New World of the Internet and YouTube, there are plenty of Springsteen performances from various concerts that I *can* see again and again if I so desire. And often, I do.

And it even turns out that it’s possible, in a way, to relive parts of the Murfreesboro concert. The so-called “BruceBase” online wiki has transcripts of Bruce’s intros to many of the songs that he played that night. And there’s also a bootleg three-disk LP set! It was produced, soon after the concert, by some obscure record company in France and I found out about it during my Internet search because one set, which had been owned by a collector in South Africa, was auctioned back in 2014. The annotation to the sale stated that: “This is a limited edition of 400 worldwide, and amazingly rare. Good luck.”

There was no indication on who won the auction, but the winning bid really wasn’t very high – just \$130. I don’t think it’s ever been re-released in any format and now that I know it exists I’d like to think that someday I’ll find a place where I can buy a CD or a download. On the other hand, there’s the realization that I probably have a better chance of winning the lottery, and my luck has *never* been anywhere near that good. But I’ll keep on hoping. You know, you just never can tell. ☀



limited edition three LP set of
Bruce's concert in Murfreesboro

Afterword:

Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band have played shows in the Washington metro area many times since Nicki and I moved here in 1988. But we’ve never tried to get tickets to any of them because, as I mentioned in the essay, tickets to his shows are invariably either unavailable or else only obtainable at totally unreasonable prices from ticket resellers. And also, truth be told, we’ve long since reached the point where we no longer can easily contend with all the chaos that comes with attending a concert by a big-name musical group. Instead, it’s a much more rewarding experience for us to take in a good museum, of which there are many in Washington. One of our favorites is the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery. As you will read, this year it hosted a special exhibit which took over the entirety of the museum, about a place that I’m pretty sure I’ll never be going to.

No Spectators

A few months ago I inadvertently started a small meme in the amateur press association where I'm a member. In response to a comment about travel within the United States, I'd stated that the largest U.S. city that I've not yet been to is Dallas. A few other people responded in kind and now that I've mentioned it in this essay, I'm a bit curious if this mini-meme will make its way into other social media.

There's still a reasonable chance that I'll visit Dallas someday but there are many, many other cities that I'm pretty sure I'll *never* set foot in. The unlikeliest of all is Black Rock City, located way up in northwest Nevada – quite literally out in the middle of nowhere. It's situated on a dry lake bed *playa* that's covered with alkaline dust, the only way in and out is a two lane road, and there are no motels or restaurants. And, oh yeah, it only exists for a single week every year. But for that one week, 70,000 people make a late summer pilgrimage to the Nevada desert. For Burning Man.

The Burning Man Festival has been in existence since 1986, first on Baker Beach in San Francisco and after 1990 in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. It's been described as “an experiment in community and art” and “a vibrant participatory metropolis generated by its citizens”. There's an emphasis on ‘participatory’ – the intention is that people who come to Burning Man should be participants and not spectators. The festival is characterized by artistic creativity, self-expression, and interactiveness as exemplified by the many sculptures, vehicles, and structures which were created specifically for Burning Man, and the festival takes its name from one of these structures – an 80-foot tall anthropomorphic effigy, constructed from wood, which is set on fire on the Saturday night of the festival.

Participating in Burning Man is a demonstration of one's self-sufficiency. People who do must bring with them all of the food and water they will consume during the week, as well as shelter and anything else they will need during their stay. A week of roughing it in Black Rock City is certainly not for everyone and *especially* not for me – this late in my life I very much appreciate creature comforts. Despite many if not most Burning Man participants claiming that it's an extraordinary and even life-changing experience, I have absolutely no intention of testing my endurance to find out. But as I discovered, there was another way.

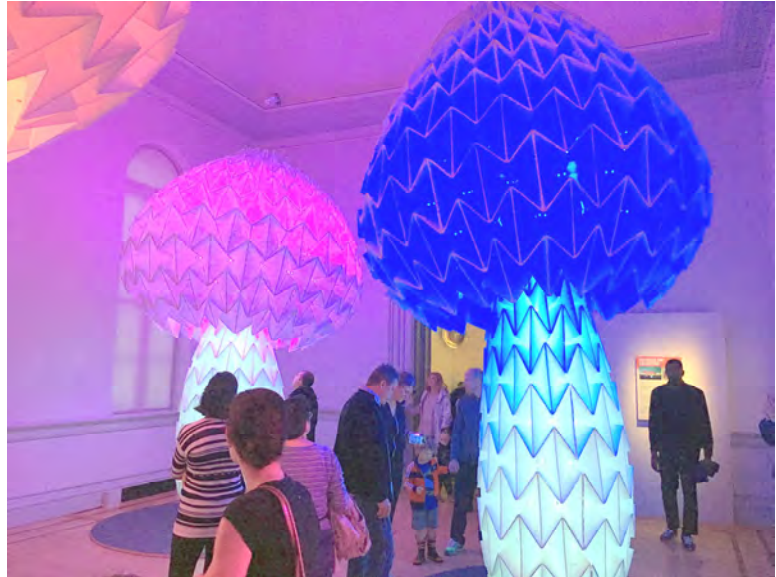
The Renwick Gallery in downtown D.C. is one of my favorite Smithsonian museums. It's housed in a wonderful old building which dates back to the 1870s and it's very eclectic in its exhibitions – over the years that I've been going there I've seen everything from “Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of ‘American Gothic’” to “Murder Is Her Hobby: Frances Glessner Lee and The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death”. But for most of 2018, the entirety of the museum has been taken over by a single exhibition: “No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man”.



the Renwick Gallery

I'd thought that trying to gain an understanding of Burning Man and its culture from walking through a museum exhibition would end up being merely a relatively shallow vicarious experience, but it turned out to be a lot more than that. The exhibition curator, in collaboration with the nonprofit Burning Man Project, was able to bring in many large-scale constructs from recent festivals to the Renwick. And many of them were participatory in nature. An example of this were several internally-lit mushroom-shaped kinetic sculptures by the Foldhaus Art Collective titled

“Shrumen Lumen”. They were not only whimsically amusing, there were footpads located at the base of the mushrooms which when stepped on caused them to grow and change shape.



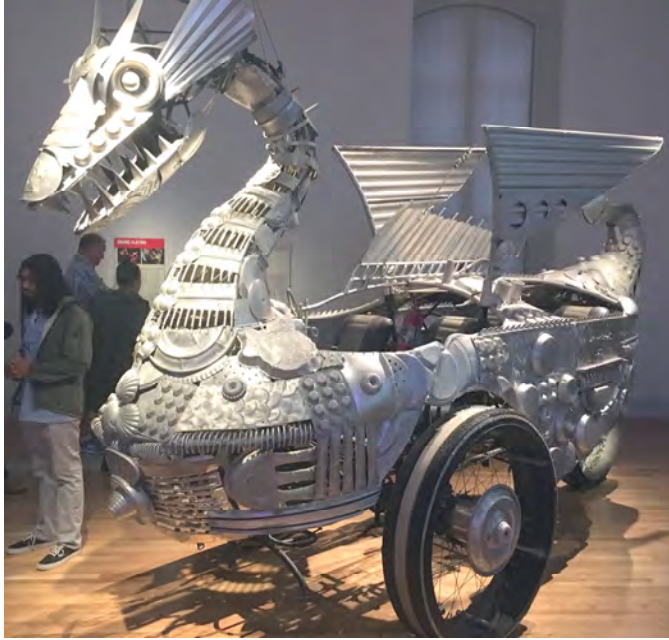
the “Shrumen Lumen” kinetic sculptures



the Hyperspace Bypass Construction Zone sculptures

There were other works on display which were more contemplative than directly participatory. One of these, the eponymous Hyperspace Bypass Construction Zone (named for its artist collective creators), had debuted at the 2014 Burning Man. They were designed so that by day they appear solid, but at night the internal lighting makes ethereal patterns of light and shadow on the surrounding *playa*. The effect probably wasn't quite the same in the confines of the museum gallery, but the intricacies in their designs gave them changing visual textures as you walked past them.

There are of course many things at Burning Man which cannot be recreated in a museum exhibition – the obvious example is the Saturday night conflagration of the wooden effigy. But there has also been a fire-breathing dragon, of sorts. It's actually a so-called “mutant vehicle” that was created by artist Duane Flatmo that appears to have been constructed using muffin pans, cake molds, and other recycled aluminum objects of various kinds. The sculpture, titled “Tin Pan Dragon”, appeared at the 2008 Burning Man and is entirely pedal powered, though for the purposes of the exhibition we were limited to watching it perform via a video.



Duane Flatmo's "Tin Pan Dragon" kinetic sculpture



close up of some of the design elements of the "Tin Pan Dragon"

For me, the highlight of the exhibition was a large-scale recreation of the inside of the Temple, which filled the Renwick's Grand Salon room. At Burning Man, the Temple is an ornately-designed wooden structure (both inside and out) which functions as a non-denominational shared space where festival participants can go to silently remember the past and contemplate the future. Those who do usually write a personal reminiscence about someone or something on one of the walls, and by the final evening of Burning Man the Temple is described as covered with these inscriptions. And then it is burned to the ground.

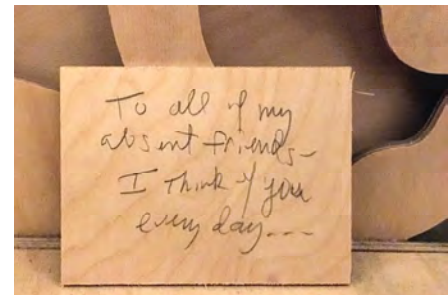


a small section of the Renwick's recreation of the Temple, with inscribed wooden plinths from some of the visitors

There was no indication if that same fate would result for the recreation at the Renwick, but visitors were still encouraged to write brief memorials or testaments on small wooden plinths and place them around the walls of the room. The one that I left was about loss and remembrance.

In the end, I did gain a deeper insight and appreciation about Burning Man and its culture. The Black Rock Desert

playa is too harsh an environment for me but I now understand some of the allure that brings thousands of people there every year. The curator of the exhibition said it best: "There are no outsiders. Everyone is part of the experience." ☀

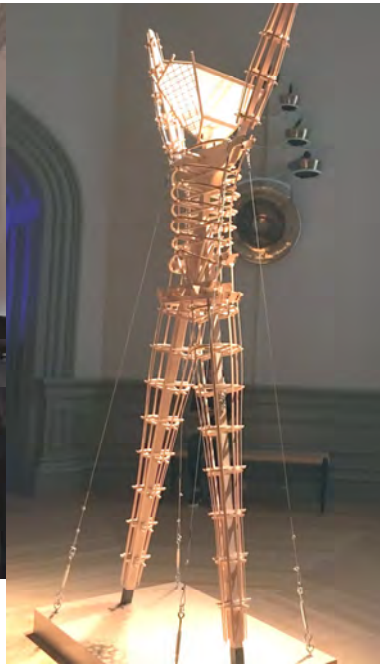


the plinth that I left

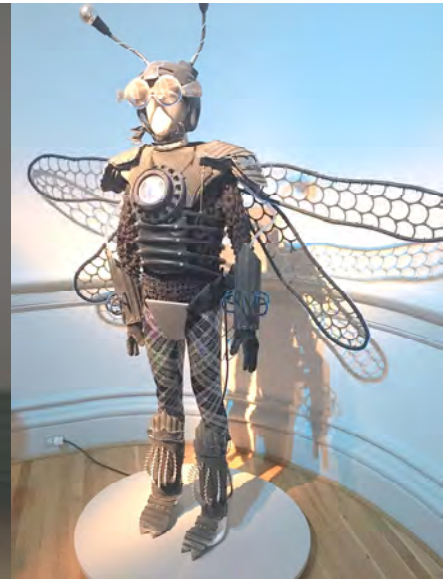
More photos from the Renwick's Burning Man exhibition



Marco Cochrane's "Truth is Beauty" sculpture from the 2013 festival



small-scale reproduction of the Man



Tyler FuQua's 2014 "Thorax, Ambassador of the Insects" costume



inside the Temple



the ceiling of the Temple

Afterword:

There are many things to do in Washington, of which museums are just a small part. My work location was in D.C. for a seven year stretch from the mid '90s through the middle of 2003 and once in a while I would go to a luncheon seminar hosted by one of the conservative think tank organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, just to see if I could ruffle some feathers by asking a pointed question. Once in a while I did, but more often than not it was mostly just an opportunity to first-hand observe some politics in action, as what happened in the middle of the George W. Bush era back in 2003.

The Art of Politic-speak

The Heritage Foundation sponsored a luncheon event today about the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the main speaker was Michael Garcia, a former Federal prosecutor who is now an Assistant Secretary at DHS as the head of its Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE used to be the Immigration and Naturalization Service before that Agency became part of DHS, so the event was, in effect, a progress report, five months in, about ICE in particular and DHS in general.

There was a lot to tell, actually – ICE has all kinds of activities going on, from intelligence-gathering to pursuit to prosecution. You’d expect that they are active on the anti-terrorism front, of course, but they are also the point organization for investigation of so-called ‘human cargo’ cases, the smuggling of illegal immigrants into the country in shipping containers (which sometimes become death traps).

It was a prepared speech, very polished, and he went on and on and on about all the things ICE was doing. There was so much going on, in fact, that it presented an obvious opening for a question, as well as a chance to see if he was as sharp as he seemed to be. So when the Q&As began, I was recognized for a question and asked:

“One of the headlines in The Washington Post today was that an attempt by Congressional Democrats to increase the funding of DHS had been defeated. In light of all the activities you described in your speech, do you believe that ICE in particular and DHS in general has sufficient funding to meet its mission?”

As expected, he said yes. He replied that existing resources were sufficient, though they need to be used smarter and more efficiently. My question was actually a bit of a trap. If he’d instead shouted out, “Hell, no! More money is needed!” (which is most likely true) there would have been a new Assistant Secretary seated in his place maybe as early as tomorrow – publicly disavowing the President’s budget request, when you’re a high-ranking official in one of the Executive Branch organizations, is usually a pretty good way to get yourself fired.

There were no follow-ups to that by other questioners, though I kind of doubt very many people believed him. But I don’t really think Garcia was, well, lying – ‘lying’ isn’t really the right word when there’s direct marching orders on what you cannot say in public. Maybe a better way of putting it is that he was ‘engaging in politic-speak’.

On my way out of the event, I decided that Mr. Garcia was way too slick and sharp to remain a menial Assistant Secretary for very much longer. I’m sure we’ll see more of him later on, after he’s out from under W’s apron. ☀

Afterword:

Michael Garcia has indeed gone on to bigger and better things in the 15+ years since that luncheon event. He’s now an Associate Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals. And we all know what ICE has been up to lately.

There’s room for one last bit of writing in this collection, and it’s something I composed less than a month ago. Nicki and I are cat people, in the pet ownership sense of the words, and back in 2009 we brought into our home two very handsome guys from the local animal shelter. Here’s a short essay about one of them.

To the Maxx

I'd always known that house cats can tell right from wrong. They *know* that they're not supposed to be up on the kitchen table, or chewing on shoelaces, or roughhousing with each other – *especially* roughhousing. But they do it anyway, and almost always when they notice they're not being watched. But it wasn't all that long ago that I discovered that they also know how to apologize for misbehaving.

It was our pet Mighty Maxx who demonstrated that to me. He, along with his bonded companion Joltin' Joe, were shelter cats that we adopted back in 2009. Whereas Joe has a very sweet personality which has taken years to fully blossom, Maxx had a larger-than-life ego which filled all the available space in any room he entered. Maxx was also a sweetie pie, most of the time, and he often gave out affectionate head bumps just to show that he loved you. But if he thought he was being disrespected he could get up in your face about it.

That's what occurred one evening, not long before lights out, when Maxx had strode into the bedroom and hopped up onto our bed. He flopped down between us, taking up altogether too much room, and when I nudged him to get him to move he took offense and hissed at me.

But then something remarkable happened. I could immediately see a change in his demeanor – he calmed down, blinked once and moved down toward the foot of the bed. And then he gave me three hard head bumps, one-two-three in rapid succession. He was apologizing for his bad behavior.



Mighty Maxx in happier times

Maxx was endlessly entertaining, as if he was a kitten who never grew up. And he had such a sunny personality that nothing would keep him down for very long. So when something did, it was cause for alarm. On Monday evening, November 12th, he appeared to be as outgoing as usual, even hopping up on the couch next to Nicki to investigate what she was crocheting. But he never came upstairs that evening, and the next morning we found him very lethargic. Nicki took him to our vet, who almost immediately diagnosed a severe cardiac event – his heart was racing and his blood pressure had crashed. And he was rapidly deteriorating. Soon afterwards he was at a nearby veterinary hospital where the doctors were able to 'stabilize' him in the sense that they were barely keeping him alive.

Nicki and I visited him the next day, and it was clear that he wasn't going to make it. There were tubes and monitoring probes going into or onto him, and he didn't much respond when we talked to him and petted him. But then he did. Just as we were about to leave his energy level seemed to slightly increase. I could see that he recognized that Nicki was there, and he crept over as far as he could to be near her. We're both convinced that he was saying good-bye.

The veterinary doctor asked if we wanted to euthanize, and we agreed to give him a fighting chance by not making a decision just yet. But it never came down to that. He'd used up the last of his reserves and died just a couple of hours later.

He was quite a guy, and to say we're missing him is an understatement. Our memories will be of happier times, of which there were many over the past nine years. Some of the best things in life are the simple pleasures. Owning a cat like Maxx is one of them. ☀

