

## 2018 Week 3: The Week Ending Saturday, January 20th



Figure 1: Word Cloud

### Sunday

#### *Paddington 2* (2017 film)

Last night I took the kids out to see a movie, *Paddington 2*. It's a costly and challenging thing, to take the whole family to a single movie. It costs almost \$75. It was quite cold last night, about 10 degrees, so no one was excited to get into the car. Benjamin has difficulty sitting through a full-length movie, even a movie about a talking bear. He spent much of the show playing with the settings of his lounge seat and, at one point, sitting on it upside-down with his head on the seat and his feet in the air (I did make him sit more or less upright, at that point). I hate to get to movies late, and we were quite late — even though there must have been twenty minutes of trailers, we missed a few minutes of the movie.

Despite all this, I had a good time. *Paddington 2* is very funny. Hugh Grant is great, but the supporting cast is great, too. They play less flamboyant, more ordinary characters, and act as foils to Grant. They can't chew the scenery like Grant. They have to play these roles deadpan. So every laugh comes from the situation and the comic timing. There are magical realist and fantasy elements breaking out all over the place, but the movie is still anchored in a simple plot,

places that seem real, and easy-to-understand relationships. The movie avoids, almost entirely, dumb fart jokes and other talking animal movie gags. It's really a treasure in an age of animated films which are often painfully uninteresting and feel like they are designed to delight an infant while leaving a parent's eyeballs bleeding.

After the movie we baked a giant pot pie from Costco. They have changed their recipe, it seems, and the instructions. You're now supposed to bake them for 90 minutes at 375. The new one seemed to be a little less soupy and more meaty than the previous ones. Grace was happy because it doesn't seem to have as much salt as before. The Costco pot pie is one of the few prepared dishes Costco sells that will actually make a meal for our whole family of eight — with some left over for lunch on Sunday, even!

### **I. T. Stuff**

I did some overdue IT stuff. Apparently our internet speed has been upgraded, so I had to reboot the cable modem. While I was at it, I updated the firmware on the Wi-Fi router and updated all the passwords. I initially was trying to control it using my new ThinkPad 460s with a wired connection. It was odd — the lights on the Ethernet socket on the side of the laptop would come on, one solid green and one flashing yellow, and the light indicating activity on the router's Ethernet port would turn yellow, then white, and flicker showing traffic. But Windows kept reporting that the Ethernet port was disabled. I'd tell Windows to enable it, and it would report that there was no cable connected, and then tell me what an Ethernet cable looked like. (Thanks, Windows!) I tried a second cable, with the same results. There was nothing wrong with the cables. The link was up and running at a lower level, but the system would not talk over the link. I finally tried doing a driver update, and it started working. Why the laptop as it arrived, just a month ago, didn't have a working Ethernet driver, I can't even pretend to understand.

### **Installing Updates**

Having solved a few issues, I decided to try to install every available update on the laptop, both the Windows updates and the updates from the separate Lenovo management tool. That turned into a very frustrating couple of hours that kept me up until almost 2 a.m. It's 2018 and Microsoft's software update process is still unbelievably bad. In Windows 10 it doesn't look like I can disable automatic updating and run updates manually when I want to install them. This gives me the uncomfortable sensation that I can't actually take charge of my own computer. And apparently updates still fail routinely with obscure error codes, and sometimes I can't find a help page for a given update without using Google. Update KB4056892 in particular seems to be disastrous. Apparently I'm fortunate that this update didn't brick my computer, as that has happened to some people. I escaped that problem, but I have this problem:

Even though the update was successfully installed, Windows Update incorrectly reports that the update failed to install. To verify the installation, select Check for Updates to confirm that there are no additional updates available.

That would be annoying enough, but on my computer *several* updates are stuck and failing. I've tried downloading the individual installers, with mixed results. I've tried several different troubleshooters, which supposedly fixed some problems, but not all of them. Does anyone in the real world have a PC running Windows that *doesn't* have some kind of corrupt, failed, or confused software update history? I seriously doubt such a thing exists, or can exist.

I still have a situation where when I reboot, the control panel tells me that all updates were installed successfully, and then a few seconds later I get a notification in the message center saying that updates did not install successfully. The UX (user experience) for dealing with these updates is hot garbage.

Lenovo's Vantage application (which apparently is the replacement for the previous Lenovo application which the computer arrived with a month ago, and which Lenovo's application now tells me is obsolete and can be uninstalled), keeps telling me that there is an Intel Wireless LAN driver that urgently needs to be installed because it is a "critical update." This driver, it says, is a 94 megabyte download and uses 267.1 megabytes of hard disk space. That's about the same size as Elbow's album "Build a Rocket Boys," in my iTunes library, encoded in Apple Lossless format. Did Intel drop a mixtape on my computer? What the hell is it installing? A driver should be a space station, not a moon!

I've "successfully" installed the same version of the driver three times. The installation log says "Intel Wireless LAN Driver - 10 [64] V.20.10.2, Successfully installed on 14-Jan-18 at 1:35 AM, Package Size: 94MB, Release Date: 21-Dec-17." But I still get the same notification about an urgently-needed update.

So I also tried updating the driver through Device Manager (now apparently a buried feature in Windows 10). That wasted a few minutes but produced no positive results. The first time I tried it, my computer spent a few minutes trying to access a server, and failed. The second time, it told me "the best drivers for this device are already installed."

Device manager says that driver is version 20.10.1.3. So it looks like perhaps Lenovo's tool can't handle it when a *later* version of a driver is installed by Microsoft's software update? I don't know. This must mean the Lenovo updater is not actually installing a driver, but still reporting a successful installation in its log.

As long as the thing is not actually crashing with the blue screen of death, or whatever color it is now, I guess I should be content, but I think it's just going to keep trying and failing to update drivers, and notifying me about its failures, until Microsoft and Lenovo eventually patch their patches, or maybe patch their patchers.

## Monday

Yesterday turned out to be a decent day, although challenging. I was up early for a Sunday: I was making tea at 8:00. After quite a bit of time cleaning up the kitchen, that morphed into cooking a lot of GFS bacon (it was not that good — we will go back to the thick cut Applewood-smoked bacon from Costco next time), then frying some pancakes in the bacon fat, loading each pancake with blueberries. This technique makes pancakes that are almost deep-fried in bacon fat. You only need one. They're probably over a thousand calories each. Near-paleo pancakes?

Following more cleanup and a shower, Grace and I went to a Huron Valley DSA meet-up at the Cultivate Coffee and Tap House in downtown Ypsilanti. Grace drove my car, because she still knows her way around Ypsilanti a lot better than I do. It was a two-hour meet up and we got there more than an hour late, which I always find frustrating. Grace split off for a while to join another group, an affordable housing meet-up. I wound up in conversations with a few folks. We didn't talk politics much but it was a good chat anyway. I get extraverted out quickly, though. (My preference is to spell it the way Jung spelled it.)

## Errands

We made a couple stops after that. We went to Once Upon a Child, the used clothing store Grace goes to sometimes. I had never been in there. It's kind of amazing — I think the building has more clothing under one roof than any clothing store I've ever seen. There are and aisles of used children's clothes. It reeks of Tide, though, which my lungs don't like, so I bailed out early and waited outside while Grace finished up. We were looking for a snowsuit for Elanor that was thin enough to allow her to fit properly into her car seat. They had little Columbia fleece baby bunting outfits, but wanted \$40 for them. Grace pointed out that they had similar new ones on closeout on the Columbia web site for under \$20 (I just confirmed: the "Snowtop II Bunting — Infant" is 40% off at \$17.90 with free shipping.) Columbia stuff is nice (two of my favorite winter coats have been Columbia), but they were selling a used outfit for more than list price of the similar new item (\$29.99), I guess on the theory that Columbia brand clothes are for the 1% and so they can charge whatever they want. We got it for \$20 which still seems high, but we wanted to use it this week.

We made one more stop — to check out the Fresh Thyme market in Ypsi. It is sort of like Whole Foods was before it metastasized and started erecting giant, ridiculous "temples of food" that Grace and I pretty much refuse to walk into anymore. Fresh Thyme has a pretty high markup on packaged foods, but their bulk food prices are more reasonable. Their meat counter was nothing special. We might use them for one or two hard-to-find items (not everyone has fresh turmeric root, for example), but probably not much else. I am planning to start cooking some simple Indian dinners and I need to pick up some ingredients, but for those I'll be going to a real Indian grocery, where spices are fresher and cost

far less.

When we got home, Veronica informed us that Elanor had been up and playing, but only for a short time, and had then gone back to sleep. It seems baby Elanor probably has a virus she is fighting off. So we just fed her and nursed her and let her sleep much of the afternoon and evening.

### **Lost and Found**

I was able to sit down with Grace for a while yesterday and discuss podcast topics. Our deadline for restarting the show after the holiday hiatus is fast approaching. I had all kinds of things I wanted to get done — writing, production, etc. I may be about to get an intro and outro segment recorded and mixed, but it's a bit uncertain. We also sat down and paid a bunch of bills — co-pays, the last bill from Early Bird Lawn Services in Saginaw, a car license renewal fee. We're in a bit of a cash flow crunch after the holidays. A number of bills hit unexpectedly in December, including a \$1500 car repair on the Tahoe. We will squeak through but things in February are going to be tight and we will have to dip into savings. I just hope that there aren't too many other unpleasant surprises over the next two weeks.

### **The Reloop Mixage**

Grace went through some boxes in the storage room in the basement and made a very welcome discovery. She found my lost DJ mixer. It is a “Reloop Mixage Controller Edition,” the “limited edition white” version with reddish LEDs. This is a control surface for use with DJ software like Traktor. It's basically a box of knobs and simulated platters to cue and scratch tracks like a turntable. It's a lot of fun to play with. This version is a controller only — it does not have a built-in “sound card” (no digital-to-analog converters, and no audio outputs). I ordered mine specially from the UK quite a few years ago.

I was afraid this item was lost, and was unhappy about that. I thought that I remembered packing it, but after going through almost every box in the storage room, I had not been able to find it. I had been formulating theories — did I leave a box in my unlocked car while I was loading boxes, and the whole box was stolen? Was it in the garage? And even “did I sell that mixer on eBay years ago to try to get a little money, back when I was unemployed, and forget that I did it?”

I was missing it recently because I wanted to use it. I had the idea that I could use Traktor and this controller to remix the music tracks I used back when I recorded *The Boats of the Glen Carrig*. I wanted to re-create the music, as closely as I could, to go along with a new, better-sounding voice track, since in 2018 I can record much better-sounding spoken-word tracks.

Back in 2006, I put that project together on my old Titanium PowerBook G4 from 2001. My computer resources were limited and my audio equipment was also

limited. I had endless troubles trying to use several different USB microphones. I didn't have a lot of hard drive space. I made the mixed audio tracks with a program called DSP Quattro. If I recall correctly, DSP Quattro didn't support automating mixes. I couldn't set mixer levels in advance at different points along the music tracks, and then then have DSP Quattro follow those levels to create the mixed audio file. I had to control the levels for the tracks live, in real time. And so that means that the final audio files for each chapter of *Boats* are actually recordings of live performances that I can't precisely re-create.

My next thought was to try to use the current version of DSP Quattro to open the old project files, and see if I could at least generate a music track without narration. But the old DSP Quattro I used back in 2006 was for MacOS 9 on PowerPC. There have been updated versions since then, but I recently tried the demo version, and it did not play audio on my Mac Pro correctly at *all*. It produced a lot of crackling, and then locked up.

Maybe I should try it again, or maybe I should try running it on my Mac Mini and see if it works better on that machine. But it doesn't seem too promising. At some point, and I've been in this boat (lifeboat?) lots of times, your carefully saved files aren't usable any more, not because they are corrupted or lost, but because the application that created them can no longer be made to work, at least without heroic effort, up to and including tracking down flakey vintage hardware and old operating system versions to run it on, or perhaps an emulator.

I started kicking around the idea that maybe, instead of trying to get DSP Quattro working again, I could use my DJ mixer to mix a new version of the music track for each chapter with a similar live feel. But when I had a little time to see if I could get that idea working, I found that my mixer had gone missing.

### **The Missing Hard Drives**

I also was missing two portable hard drives — the drives that I used to back up the Mac Mini. I knew that if I bought replacements for them that I would probably find the originals soon after, and it turns out that happened. Although it will not necessarily be a bad thing to have spare backup drives.

Anyway, Grace found the mixer and the drives. They were both carefully wrapped in bubble wrap, but they were in a box that contained mostly clothing, one of the larger boxes that I used for clothes rather than heavier stuff. This particular box was completely unlabeled, and I had put it on the shelf with the other boxes of clothing.

It isn't like me to mix up stuff, but looking back on my notes, I may have packed this particular box at the end of a three-day packing binge last summer when I was exhausted and feverish and desperate to be done. To quote myself from June:

That Monday, despite pounding glasses of water, and an iced coffee, and despite the fact that it wasn't that warm in the upstairs, I was

sweating like crazy all afternoon, and felt dizzy. My back ached, which I attributed to carrying heavy boxes and being 49 years old and far too sedentary. But then *everything* started to ache. In the car on the way home, so much hurt inside my rib cage, pain signals coming from various vague places, that I began to wonder if I was having some kind of mild heart attack, or some kind of problem with my kidneys or liver. Even my fingers and toes hurt.

I was sick for quite a while — right through Elanor’s baptism. That was the virus where green goo was oozing out of my *eyes*. Yeah, that was horrible. So maybe I should not criticize myself too harshly for failing to label some boxes, back when I was sick and pushing myself to the point of exhaustion.

### **The Mystery of Box 87**

We got the Fiestaware boxed up and put away in the storage room downstairs, to await the coming of better times (or at least more space to display it).

I also solved the mystery of book box 87. There is a box missing from the stacks, and so I haven’t been able to stack them up in number order like they used to be. I kept thinking there was a box 87 missing somewhere in the basement. But it looks like I emptied out box 87 and marked it in the database as “recycled box,” with no books in it. I must have emptied it and taken the books upstairs. So I need to make a new box 87. It will probably get some of the books I read in 2017, such as the first five volumes of Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*.

This is just one of a lot of routine organizing tasks that I need to work on. I put so much careful work into packing — until the very end, when I was rushing. And so there is some jumbled stuff down in the basement that needs attention.

I confessed to Grace yesterday that I was relieved to have her come downstairs with me. It has become demoralizing for me to go downstairs and work on things there by myself during the winter. With all the fragile things down there, I have not wanted the kids down there, especially after an incident in which they damaged a costly subwoofer — I just can’t handle the prospect of them carelessly breaking anything more. During the winter months, even though it is not a damp, nasty basement but a dry one with good lighting, it is still cold and lonely down there.

### **Organizing the Batteries**

I also got through (well, most of the way through) a small project that has been waiting for some of my time and attention. In our old house, as I found when packing, I had batteries stashed all over the place. In my home office, I use a lot of batteries. Many pieces of music gear, including my digital recorders, use batteries. I have a number of small embedded projects that use batteries, sometimes with homemade power adapter boards that I built. So there were hundreds of batteries, alkaline and lithium, ranging from brand new and unused

to stone dead and leaking electrolyte. I own a little battery tester device, so I scooped up all the loose batteries and went through them and got rid of all the batteries that didn't pass muster. The kids helped.

At least half of them were usable. We threw away the dead alkalines, but I now have a bag of dead non-rechargeable lithium batteries as well as a number of dead rechargeable batteries of various types, including a very old ThinkPad battery. I will get these to a recycling center. There are also a couple of older nickel metal hydride rechargeable packs that came out of broken cordless phones. Does anyone recycle those?

I am happy to have this project done, as the boxes downstairs contained a *lot* of mixed batteries of various types, some leaking. It made me just a little uncomfortable as there is a small, but non-zero, chance of old rechargeable lithium batteries blowing up. There may be a small chance of *non-rechargeable* batteries blowing up too — I don't know. I'd like to store the unused lithium batteries upstairs, where we are likely to notice a fire much sooner, and in some kind of a fireproof box.

I was also searching my computer, and Grace was searching our paper files, for the paperwork from back when we bought her current cell phone. We were looking for the PIN to allow us to change our plan. I think I kept it specifically so we would have the PIN if necessary. We had no luck finding it. It may be possible for me to reset it online, but I'm not sure about that.

Since I was searching e-mail, I also pulled several years of old messages down from the DreamHost server to the local mailbox on my Mac Pro, and ran backups. In my mind, I clean out and archive my e-mail every year. But in practice, it looks like I last cleaned out my "old-messages" folder in 2013. Oops.

### **Keychain Troubles**

Grace's old mail is all on the Mac Mini. I tried to bring that fully up to date, too. There is some kind of problem that has plagued that machine for a long time. When I'm logged in as Grace, using her account, and trying to get her e-mail, I can provide her password to log in, and it works fine, but the Mail application constantly asks me to give the password to unlock the keychain. And when it does, it stops whatever it is doing. Usually it asks three times, then I hit cancel three times, then a few seconds later it asks three more times, then I hit cancel three more times, then it runs for a while, but eventually it asks again and brings everything to a halt; it won't synchronize any messages until I give it the password three more times.

I have tried to clean out the keychain, but even as myself, using my account with administrator privileges, it seems like I don't have the right password to satisfy the keychain utility. So I'm not sure what to do. I'll be Googling that problem and trying yet again to figure out how to fix it. I'll probably have to look at console logs. It may be one of those things that will get fixed only when



I can eventually replacing the Mac Mini with a new machine running a fresh operating system configuration.

Now that's got me wondering if I can move Grace's whole old account to my Mac Pro, or to another computer. Supposedly Migration Assistant can do this. Can it do it with a backup from a considerably older version of MacOS X? In any case it will have to wait until I have a bigger system drive on the Mac Pro. I'm hoping to get that done soon. There is so much to do. I want to set up a computer upstairs that Sam and Veronica can use for programming, too, but we probably want to keep such a computer off the Internet.

With everything we *did* manage to get done, there is one thing I regret that we *didn't* get done. We didn't make it to Mass. I regret that. We try to get so much done. I guess a sick baby is a reasonable excuse, but still, we should have gone.

***The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 5: "Riddles in the Dark"**

Last night's story was chapter 5 of *The Hobbit*, called "Riddles in the Dark." It's a great chapter, with lots of riddles and lots of Gollum's lines to read in Gollum's voice. Unfortunately my voice gave out before the end of the chapter, but Joshua is getting good enough at reading out loud that he took over for me and finished the chapter.

***The Compleat Enchanter: The Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea* by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp**

This morning I read a couple dozen more pages of one of the books I didn't finish in 2017, *The Compleat Enchanter*. I'm almost done with it. I have had trouble staying interested in the third novella. I'm honestly not sure if I can give this one a fair review, since I've been sick and tired, and sometimes when I try to read something while I'm not at my best, I just can't concentrate on it. But it seems that if the novella was really interesting, I wouldn't be having to force myself to finish it — it would have kept my interest, and I would have made it a priority to finish reading it.

My overall impression is that the third novella is not quite as engaging as the first two. And the novella's depiction of Arab culture — well, it isn't as bigoted as it could be, but going right for a magic carpet gag seems a little lazy, and the magic wasn't as interesting this time. You might have a different reaction, but I'd say if you take a chance on *The Compleat Enchanter*, don't be surprised if the third novella feels a little long and disappointing compared to the first two. Overall, I'm just not sure the three offer *that* much in the way of rewards to a contemporary fantasy fan. It could be that our age just isn't emotionally compatible with relatively lightweight and genteel escapism on offer here. I think we demand darker, more cathartic tales in darker times.

## **And More Snow**

And so begins a new work week. There is snow coming down today, and it is strangely foggy. Grace may be driving the kids to go see the Henry Ford Museum, as they have free admission today (Martin Luther King day). We'll see how that goes.

I just got the news that Dolores O'Riordan, the singer for the Cranberries, is dead at 46.

## **Tuesday**

Grace tried in vain yesterday to get the kids to work through their regular daily chores and schoolwork, so that she could take them to the Henry Ford Museum. But apparently they completely blew it.

I was planning to read them another chapter of *The Hobbit* as a bedtime story, but they had to do a few dinner cleanup chores, get their teeth brushed, and get pajamas on. After they procrastinated for about 45 minutes, we decided it was too late for a story. Instead of a story they got a lecture about staying on track so that we can all do the things we want to do.

This morning's reading, over breakfast at Harvest Moon Café, was a few more pages from David Brin's *Existence*.

Work is a little strange right now because it is not clear whether my top-priority project will actually happen. So, suddenly a number of weeks of development work looks like it may not wind up contributing to a product. That's not good, and demoralizing. It happens, but the key is to try to make sure it doesn't happen too often.

## **Wednesday**

### **Fixing the Keychain**

Yesterday I skimmed through a whole slew of articles from Apple's tech support site, and elsewhere, on how to fix problems with the MacOS X keychain. Last night I tried to put some of them into practice. However, the version of MacOS X on my Mac Mini is older, and so some of the suggestions don't seem to apply. There is a keychain "first aid" function that seemed to improve the situation. It doesn't seem to prevent the machine from asking for the password at all, but at least now it doesn't ask over and over again. I was able to get more of Grace's old mail synchronized. The keychain still seems to behave a little bizarrely, though. For example, I don't even have the option to lock the "Local Items" keychain while I'm signed into Grace's account, so I can't test whether I can unlock it.

## ***Star Trek: The Next Generation* Season 4, Episode 12: “The Wounded”**

Last night we watched an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* from season 4, called “The Wounded.” We’re still working our way through the viewing guide. This one is pretty good, about a Star Fleet captain, Maxwell, who has gone renegade. We meet the Cardassians, who of course figure prominently in *Deep Space Nine*. Early on they had some deeply goofy headgear. Here is one of Tor’s “rewatch” articles about the episode.

Maxwell has developed an obsession with the Cardassians and can’t believe the war is over. In fact he commits atrocities, killing hundreds of Cardassians in cold blood. This is a war crime and he must face justice for these acts. But he is not *just* a madman. The Cardassians really are re-arming:

Picard has one last conversation with Macet, revealing that Maxwell was right. The station he destroyed was a weapons outpost, the supply ships were running with subspace fields to prevent their cargo being scanned. When Macet asks why Picard didn’t board the supply ship as Maxwell asked, he replies that his mission was to keep the peace. If he had boarded the ship, both sides would be arming for war, and he was trying to avoid that. But now the Federation knows what the Cardassians are up to — and they’ll be watching.

Picard seems to be wiser, because he knows that short of blatant treaty violations, the Cardassians have the same rights to arm themselves that the Federation does. Bob Gunton does a nice job here as Maxwell. The episode is a good one in part because it allows moral ambiguity:

The Cardassians are also permitted to have depth. On the one hand, we have Telle to represent Cardassians who are less than honorable by trying to read things he shouldn’t on the computer. On the other, we have Daro and his conversation with O’Brien in Ten Forward. And then there’s Macet. In the end, you don’t know if he’s truly as honorable as he seems when he tells Picard that he wants peace as much as Picard does, or if he’s complicit in the hiding of weapons. Or maybe both. Either way, though, his justified anger at Maxwell’s murder of almost 700 Cardassians is palpable.

There are also some funny moments between the recently married O’Brien and Keiko, as they try to adjust to each other’s tastes in food. (Apparently Keiko is what we in the twenty-first century would call a vegan. Let’s ignore the question whether there is a *moral* case to be made for eating only plant-based foods, when all her foods are created by a replicator. Anyway, she’s eating sad-looking vegetarian food (“kelp buds, plankton loaf, and sea berries”), while O’Brien wistfully says “Sweetheart, I’m not a fish” (he prefers to breakfast on muffins, oatmeal, corned beef, and eggs).

These days I’m mostly with O’Brien, although I might skip the high-sugar

muffins, and we are bringing some semi-vegetarian dinners into our rotation. (For example, chana masala, and brown rice with cashews, although the rice is usually cooked in chicken broth.) O'Brien wants to introduce "scaloped potatoes, mutton shanks, oxtails, and cabbage." Keiko thinks that sounds "kind of heavy." To me it is actually the "plankton loaf" that seems "heavy" — I'd probably need a nap after eating any kind of "loaf." Oxtail stew is one of the most wonderful things I've ever eaten. I spent most of my younger years avoiding eggs and grew up on skim milk and boneless, skinless chicken breasts. I'm not sorry at all, and it has only improved my health, to eat all the eggs I care to, and indeed some mornings to drink bulletproof coffee (press pot-brewed coffee blended with butter, coconut oil, and the way I make it, dark chocolate).

There's a moment of shock and wide-eyed fascination as Keiko realizes that O'Brien's mother was a real cook who cooked real food, including meat, made from once-living animals:

O'BRIEN: Oh, you'll love it, I promise. I can still remember the aromas when my mother was cooking.

KEIKO: She cooked?

O'BRIEN: She didn't believe in a replicator. She thought real food was more nutritious.

KEIKO: She handled real meat? She touched it and cut it?

In this scene, Rosalind Chao looks both slightly appalled and hugely fascinated, as she has apparently never eaten meat cut from the carcass of an animal. It's pitch-perfect. She seems to regard this as both a barbaric folkway *and* perhaps something she'd love to try, at least once. I love these interactions, although I also wonder why they don't just set the replicator to make two different breakfasts. But I guess that would deprive the writers of some mild conflict that they can use to explore the characters, so it seems to be the societal expectation that couples should choose to share one meal. Beverly Crusher and Jean-Luc Picard have trouble agreeing on breakfast, until he finally convinces her that he has really only ever wanted a minimalist breakfast of coffee and croissant.

My own breakfasts during the work week tend to be a bit catch-as-catch-can. If Grace is up when I'm up and getting ready, I'll usually have coffee with her, and maybe a couple of eggs, avocado, and some toasted bread or an English muffin, if the kids haven't eaten them all. If she's not up and I don't feel that I have time for cooking, it depends on how much time I have, and whether it seems like there is any extra money in our budget.

If I have no time, I'll go to work and have some trail mix and tea there. If I have fifteen minutes extra, I'll stop at Biggby's Coffee and get a coconut milk mocha (although, really, I should go with something less sugary), and maybe a toasted bagel. If I have thirty to forty minutes, I'll go to Harvest Moon, and have some of their good coffee and a breakfast BLT sandwich (fried egg, bacon, lettuce, and tomato on multi-grain toast). If I have over an hour, I might go to Zingerman's Roadhouse. Harvest Moon can usually get me out the door in

thirty minutes, if everything goes smoothly and the kitchen and waitstaff are running efficiently. Zingerman's Roadhouse is all over the map. They are much more efficient early, but slow down dramatically after the 9:00 hour. Sometimes it can take 90 minutes. I rarely have that much time in the morning and so I haven't been back there for a couple of months, although their food is excellent, and if you stick to the breakfast special, reasonable value for the money; wander elsewhere on the menu at grave risk to your budget. If Harvest Moon had slightly better food, and had some fresh fruit available, I might very well never go back to the Roadhouse for breakfast.

### **A Meatier Meteor**

Last night there was apparently a big meteorite over Michigan, and some of my co-workers saw it or felt the buildings shake.

I've seen very brilliant, bright green, and loud "bolide" meteorites before, but I'm sorry to say that I missed this one entirely and heard about it only from the news. It flashed through the atmosphere at about 8:10 p.m. I had just gotten home and was probably just catching up with Grace on the events of the day. With six children across a wide age range it isn't uncommon for us to hear loud noises or feel the house shaking, so I probably just assumed the noise was due to the kids.

### **One of Those Weeks**

I keep thinking it's a day later than it is. It's only Wednesday. But on the positive side, the days are getting very noticeably longer. This is the first morning so far this year when I remember seeing daylight starting to come in my bedroom window at the moment when my alarm went off, at 7:30 a.m. Had I not been woken up quite so many times during the night, I might even have gotten up then. But sadly I was still feeling exhausted and clinging to sleep like a limpet, so I snoozed for another thirty minutes. It was quite cold last night, about five degrees, but more of those trademark wild temperature swings are coming, and it is supposed to get into the forties this weekend. Maybe my car windshield sprayer will start working again.

I took a long lunch because it was sunny and bright out. It turns out that my windshield sprayer *was* working again. So it seems indisputable that the problem was due to freeze-up of the wiper fluid. The rear windshield sprayer hasn't worked in a long time (In fact, I'm not sure I remember it ever working, since I got the car in 2015).

### **Lesser-Known Works by Tolkien**

I picked up a book that I've had my eyes on: *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* by Tolkien, edited by Verlyn Flieger. This is a short older poetic work by Tolkien, published back in 1945 and out of print since then. It's probably more of interest to Tolkien collectors and fans of antique forms of poetry than to the average fan

of *The Lord of the Rings*. But I've collected all twelve volumes of *The History of Middle Earth* and enjoyed reading parts of them. Over the last few years I've also acquired most of the posthumously published Tolkien books including *The Children of Húrin*, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrén*, *The Fall of Arthur*, *The Story of Kullervo*, and *The Tale of Beren and Lúthien*, so I couldn't really pass this up.

I can't really call myself a hardcore Tolkien collector, though, since outside of *Beowulf: a Translation and Commentary*, I have not tried to collect his academic works. And I have to confess that most of the recently published Tolkien books are largely just serving as very pretty shelf-candy at present (at least they would if they were on my shelves, instead of in boxes). The only one of these recent books that I have completely finished is *The Children of Húrin*. That material was a little more familiar to me since I had already read some parts of the story, in incomplete versions, in *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and *The Book of Lost Tales*; *The Children of Húrin* makes these fragmentary stories into a complete arc.

#### ***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* by J. K. Rowling**

I also picked up a paperback copy of Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth Harry Potter book. I've read this before, but did not have a copy, and got this copy to use for bedtime reading. I also want to note that The Quibbler podcast has just restarted after a hiatus for the holidays, and they are beginning with *Order of the Phoenix*, so if you are interested in a Harry Potter re-read, this would be a good time to start with *Phoenix*, and follow along with the podcast. The Quibbler can be found [here](#).

#### ***More Alive and Less Lonely: On Books and Writers* by Jonathan Lethem**

And, finally, I came across a book of essays by Jonathan Lethem called *More Alive and Less Lonely: On Books and Writers*. It contains introductions and other short essays he's written about specific books and writers including some pieces about the works of Philip K. Dick. As he was a co-editor of *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, it was a no-brainer for me to pick up this collection. I also have read and enjoyed some of the essays in his previous collection, *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.* I have only given this book a quick skim so far, but it seems disappointing. The material on Dick is quite scanty, and I've read some of it before, for example in an introduction to one of the reprint volumes of Dick's collected stories. The Dick material in this volume represents leftovers, and isn't Lethem's best writing on Dick. The material on other writers, such as Kazuo Ishiguro, *also* seems like it must be, largely, Lethem's less-interesting, less-detailed writing on the subjects.

## On Philip K. Dick's Novels

Readers might find an uncollected Lethem essay called “You Don’t Know Dick” to be of more interest, because it speaks harsh but important truths about Dick’s *oeuvre*. The text on the web site is a bit screwed up; it looks like a bad OCR job. I have tried to fix some obvious problems in my quotes, below:

By now nobody needs persuading that Dick is some kind of important figure, but anyone who has cracked one of the books knows he presents problems, foremost in the disastrous unevenness of his prose, even within the space of a given page.

Lethem outlines the experience of trying to read *all* of Dick’s novels, and describes accurately what a confusing turn-off that can be. His experience almost perfectly matches my experience; I tracked down, with considerable effort, almost every single published Dick novel in battered original paperback editions. He continues:

When I was fifteen and sixteen I scoured Brooklyn’s used-book stores and thrift shops for the hardest-to-find Dick titles, trying to complete a shelf of the thirty-seven-odd published works. This was 1979 and ’80, before Dick published his last three novels and died, and before the posthumous publication of a dozen or so manuscripts. Locating *Vulcan’s Hammer* was a notable triumph. I’ll always remember dowsing it from a crate of moldering paperbacks that had been pushed beneath a shelf, dusting off its hideous cover (Dick’s biographer Lawrence Sutin describes it as occupying a “deserved purgatory as half of a 1960 Ace Double”), and more or less pinching myself in disbelief: *Vulcan’s fucking Hammer!* I’d found it! Of course, then I had to go and read the damn thing. The irony is that out-of-printness served the purposes of exploring the *oeuvre* nicely: the easiest books to find and therefore the first I’d read were mostly masterpieces (*Castle*, *Ubik*, *Stigmata*, *Androids*), and they’d received many reprintings, whereas the dreck was always the rarest essence. Nowadays, Vintage’s uniformly prestigious shelf of clean, authoritative editions disguises the natural hierarchy absolutely.

Having done with Lethem did, scouring library book sales and thrift shops and bookstores for Dick’s rarest novels, about a decade after he did, around 1999 or 2000 I was unemployed for a time and running short on money, so I wound up selling all my Philip K. Dick pulps. I have since bought some of them back in the form of modern editions, and some of them in the form of old editions, but not all of them. I don’t miss most of them. In particular I have not re-purchased or re-read most of the “realist” novels. As Lethem writes,

...the market was flooded with outré material just reaching first light in expensive small-press hardcovers: *Ubik: The Screenplay*, *The Dark Haired Girl* (essays), *Nick and the Glimmung* (a children’s book), five volumes of Selected Letters, and enough previously unpublished

realist novels from Dick's thwarted "mainstream" efforts of the '50s to make up another writer's whole career: *Mary and the Giant*, *The Broken Bubble*, *Gather Yourselves Together*, *In Milton Lumky Territory*, *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*, *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, and *Puttering About in a Small Land*.

I have *not* ever gotten my hands on any of the volumes of Dick's letters, as they were extremely expensive and hard to find, and have only gotten more so over time. But I had *The Dark Haired Girl*, *Nick and the Glimmung*, and all those "realist" novels. I had the "expensive small-press hardcovers." And I paid collector prices for most of them, not because I really wanted them to keep them in pristine condition as collectibles, but because I wanted to *read* them. And, yes, mostly, they weren't that memorable. As Lethem writes:

It's hard to make a case for the realist novels.

And after rattling off his best-of list, he concludes:

Perhaps I fear that if I ever finish this list — the making of which is an extension of my obsessive searching in bookstores for Dick's books even after having found them all — I will die. Or grow up. Similarly, this is probably the right place to admit that I've never actually read *Gather Yourselves Together*. I suppose the truth is that I'm saving it.

I wonder if Lethem is deliberately making a jokey John Irving reference? In his essay "The King of the Novel," an introduction to *Great Expectations*, Irving writes:

My fondness for Dickens extends to an eccentricity I have not duplicated in the case of any other writer I admire — namely, I have left one Dickens novel unread. I am saving *Our Mutual Friend* for a rainy day, as they say; it is the last novel Dickens completed, and I have long imagined that it is the last novel I want to read. Of course this is madness: I am thinking of a 19th-century deathbed scene, where I am given proper warning that the end is near, and thus I am permitted to surround myself with friends and family — and I'll have just enough time remaining to read *Our Mutual Friend*.

But whether Lethem imagines he will read *Gather Yourselves Together* on his deathbed, or not — and I think if he did, his dying sensations would be disappointment and frustration — I feel his obsession. I am *still* re-reading *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. I've read it at least five times and expect to read it again. I am *still* writing about that book. I've read *Ubik* over and over. These works are mad and brilliant. Dick died too young and he suffered, and made others suffer, far too much.

Dick died at 53. Lethem is now 53. I'm 50. Both of us would so, so dearly love to stumble across some brilliant lost work of Dick's, and be able to experience again that giddy sense of recognition that we are reading a work of genius. But the truth is that if a lost Philip K. Dick novel was found, it would most likely not



be very good. Both Lethem and I will die, although I'm not entirely convinced that either of us really has to grow up; only the death part is actually a hard requirement of living.

Lethem went on to edit the Library of America's three-volume set of Philip K. Dick novels, comprising thirteen novels. One can quibble about the edge cases; there might be two or three more of Dick's novels that are really worth reading, but I think he did a good job of picking the most worthwhile. I think he did a similarly good job with Dick's stories, when he edited *Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick*. And I haven't read *Gather Yourselves Together* either — in fact, I've started to read it, twice, and given up, twice; it seems like one of those mediocre works.

Life's too short to wait. Read the good Dickens — and Dick — while you can, and don't feel guilty about skipping their less-celebrated works.

## Thursday

Last night was pretty uneventful. The kids did a pretty good job of staying on track with their chores, and so we had a great dinner without a lot of delay. We had pork medallions from Costco. I made Grace laugh by saying “pork medallions were a popular form of jewelry during the disco era, worn by male chauvinist pigs.” We also had leftover pumpkin soup from Thanksgiving (still very good), brown rice, wilted greens, and charoset. Veronica kept baby Elanor busy while Grace and I worked on the dishes (she dried).

Joshua has been asking to read some Stephen King. He wanted to read *It*, but it's a huge book, and not very child-friendly. I considered getting him a copy of *Firestarter*, which is the first Stephen King novel I read, but decided that I might as well start him on *The Dark Tower 1: The Gunslinger*, since I have the Dark Tower novels in a box downstairs. *Gunslinger* is a relatively simple story. Of course, the rest of the series is not so simple. But I'll worry about that if he makes it through the first one. The copy I've got has the revised text from 2003.

### ***The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 6: “Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire”**

After the kids got ready for bed (sluggishly, but without too much angst), I read them chapter 6 of *The Hobbit*, “Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire.” (In my edition, there is no word “and,” nor any punctuation, between those phrases.) It's a good chapter, exciting, and before the end I got to sing a couple of songs (or at least chants) by the goblins. I made it almost to the end without coughing fits, but the songs for some reason trigger the coughing. That's the thing, actually, that I resent the most about being ill, besides feeling tired — I can't quite *do* some of the things I want to do, like read stories to my kids without either coughing or feeling like I need to. And it's been interfering with my podcasts, and my work, too, since if you are constantly having coughing fits at work, it is hard on your concentration. And at some point your co-workers start to notice.

Again, it's better than it was; much better compared to Thanksgiving. But I want it to be gone completely.

At work today I got some chips in from Adafruit to try using for a small breadboard project. Unfortunately after I built the breadboard and had a discussion about it with one of my co-workers, I realized that these weren't the chips I needed, and I can't actually use them. So I ordered some other parts. They weren't expensive, but it means more delay.

Grace and I were debating whether or not to attend the Huron Valley DSA monthly meeting, which is happening tonight at the Friends Meeting House in downtown Ann Arbor. We debated by text message and then by phone call for a bit and finally decided that meeting downtown, which involves getting six kids into the car, is just too difficult, for a "school night." So for now we're going to stick to events on weekends.

I ordered some "LightDims" — they are stickers, made with a material designed to dim LED lights. My cable modem, router, and Vonage phone adapter are all in my bedroom, and their LEDs are *very* bright. I think they interfere with good sleep. I could block them completely with black tape or the "blackout edition" stickers, but I thought I'd try the regular ones first. We'll see how it goes. Apparently my address still appears by default in PayPal orders as my old shipping address, even though if I try to change my PayPal settings, it shows only one address, my current, correct address. I had to send the LightDims folks an e-mail asking them to send my order to the correct address, and I sent PayPal a message asking how I can keep my obsolete address from showing up as the default shipping address.

Grace managed to get her PIN changed for her T-Mobile phone. So now we have both PINs, and we should be able to go to the T-Mobile store and get our accounts set up so we spend less on cell phone service.

If we fix this, the only big annoying money-related thing that remains unfinished is figuring out how to get back the money that MCI (Verizon) still owes me. That, and our upcoming taxes. And of course the seemingly-intractable situation with the old house.

*Note added during editing on September 28, 2018: it seems that, by default, after many calls and letters, I gave up the fight to get that money back; their repeated stonewalling defeated me. I'm not proud of that; I'd love to have a David v. Goliath story to tell, here, but with limited time, I've had to pick other battles to fight.*

At work I listened to the "Silmarillion Seminar 1" episode of The Tolkien Professor's podcast. It's long and rambling, and sounds like it was recorded on a conference phone or a Skype call, but there is some good stuff in there, so I'll check out some other episodes.

Thursday night and this morning, I made a little more progress in *Existence*, but it's a really long book.

## Friday

Well, it was a difficult evening and morning. Grace was very upset because she got confirmation from my father that while he was in Saginaw helping us clean out the old house, he threw out a damaged chair, and never asked us if he could do that, or told us he had. It was one of a number of chairs that Grace inherited from her parents, one of the dining room chairs she grew up with. It was indeed badly damaged (the kids had torn up the seat), but it was repairable, and it had been our plan for years to eventually get all of them repaired by the furniture company in Connecticut that made them. She is certainly entitled to feel upset. I don't know what I can do to help.

Dinner was a bit of a mess. Grace roasted two chickens in our giant cast iron pan. The idea was to roast them initially at a high temperature then turn the oven down and let them bake for another hour to become fully cooked. It seems like somehow either she accidentally shut the oven off or the kids shut it off, so when we pulled it out to eat, the chicken was browned on top and looked beautiful, but it was not really fully cooked. The joints were still firmly attached, the dark meat was very tough, and the vegetables under it were still hard. So we put it all back in the pan and put it in the oven for another 45 minutes or so while we watched an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

### ***Star Trek: The Next Generation* Season 4, Episode 21: “The Drumhead”**

The episode next on our list was “The Drumhead.” This episode features Jean Simmons as Admiral Norah Satie. It seems to have received mixed reviews. In my opinion it is a pretty strong episode, although unsubtle. Subtlety is really not often the strong suit of any of the *Star Trek* series. Jonathan Frakes directed this episode and honestly I could find no real fault with the direction. The plot unfolds a bit slowly. There is a spy on board, J'Dan, a Klingon participant in the officer exchange program. It appears initially that he has stolen some engine schematics and that this is connected to sabotage of the engines. Satie arrives to help investigate and immediately starts to ingratiate herself with Picard, leaving us wondering why she is being so complimentary. Then gradually her investigation starts to go off the rails. Using a Betazoid aide, she starts grilling crew members who have had any contact with J'Dan, and she discovers that an enlisted medical technician, Simon Tarses, is nervous and seems to be hiding something. Spencer Garrett does a nice job as Tarses in these scenes.

We eventually learn that Tarses, who has slightly pointy ears and supposedly has a Vulcan grandfather, actually has a *Romulan* grandfather. This strains credibility a bit. Spock was a relatively rare half-human, and the Romulans are a recently discovered race. Since that discovery, the Federation has been in an uneasy truce with the Romulan Empire. But we're supposed to accept that this crew member's human grandmother got busy with a Romulan two generations ago. Where? Did they have a liaison in the middle of the Neutral Zone, a region

of space closely monitored by both sides?

There's a discussion on Reddit that takes on this topic, in which Redditor "foxwilliam" writes:

...let's put his father's age at 30 at the time of his birth. That would mean his father (the one with the Romulan parent) was born in 2317.

So, my question is, how did this happen? The events in Balance of Terror happened in 2266 (51 years earlier), and it was stated in that episode that no human had ever seen a Romulan despite them fighting a war decades earlier. Memory Alpha states that the Treaty of Algeron was signed in 2311 (six years earlier).

While the treaty established the terms of peace between Romulans and the Federation, at least based on what we see in TNG, it doesn't appear to have created normalized relations such that there would be Romulans commonly living among Federation people.

It's a good question. The most credible answers suggest that the grandfather in question may have been a refugee.

The details don't really matter, of course, except that the circumstances would have been so unusual that the story demands they be given *some* explanation. The screenplay wouldn't even have to solve all the mysteries for the audience; we don't need details. It would have been sufficient to just "lampshade" the situation. Picard, in his interview with Tarses, could say something about what a rare, unusual occurrence this must be. That at least would reassure the audience that they aren't wrong for thinking that this is a strange situation.

Picard also doesn't seem to be very *helpful* to Tarses. He could have mentioned how in the current political climate, it is somewhat understandable that Tarses was afraid of revealing his ancestry. He could have said that while it is a serious rules violation to lie on a Star Fleet application form, he would be happy to write a letter of commendation for the young crewman's file. There are lots of things he could have said, but we don't see him saying any of them. This feels surprising; Picard is pretty much your ultimate SJW, after all, a staunch defender of underdogs and those unfairly treated, even by his own beloved Star Fleet. But Picard says nothing reassuring, which seems out of character for him, and we aren't left with any sense of what might happen to Tarses.

The best part of the episode comes when Satie starts to lose it and becomes convinced that just about everyone on the Enterprise must be involved in a criminal conspiracy. She starts attacking Picard in a public trial. Picard takes a very wise course of action here and does not actually get into the weeds with her, trying to defend himself against his specific violations of the Prime Directive. He mentions the moving words of her famous father, which triggers Satie to start an unhinged rant, embarrassing herself in front of everyone present, including Admiral Henry. The scene where Satie realizes she has made herself look like

a raving lunatic is probably controversial. I thought it was well-acted, but if you aren't getting along well with this episode, you might see it as overwrought. I see some nice subtleties in the direction here. In his earlier grilling, Tarses covers his face with his hands in shame. In this scene, Picard does the same thing, although he is doing it to *feign* nervousness and humiliation, basically making it look like there is blood in the water, so that Satie will be unable to resist moving in for what she thinks is the kill.

In the Tor “re-watch” article here, Keith DeCandido writes:

Jean Simmons has always been a great actor, though you'd never know it from the one-dimensional performance she gives here.

I think this is a bit unfair to Simmons. She probably played the character exactly as she was directed to play the character. Her meltdown was perhaps a little unrealistically dramatic, but tell me again how *Star Trek* has always been a place where the acting is highly naturalistic and convincing, the *Law and Order* or *Hill Street Blues* of science fiction. Go on, I'm listening.

If there's one regular character who I think is given the short end of the stick in this episode, it's Worf. As DeCandido writes:

Worf takes to McCarthyism like a duck to water, though it's also his own investigation that exposes J'Dan.

Yes — Worf comes across as all too ready to participate in the witch hunt, even getting up in Picard's face about how the Federation is riddled with enemies. That seems a little out of character for the Season Four Worf, who at this point in the series is showing a lot of reserve and experience.

DeCandido is right, in my opinion, when he points out the big weakness in the story arc of this episode:

That's not the worst part, though: in the end, we get this strong-willed, powerful, respected woman who is bound and determined to save the Federation at all costs — that is, until Picard quotes her father, at which point she turns into a crazed, blubbing mess. And then, all of a sudden, it's over.

Yes. That's mostly a function of the screenplay, though, and not the acting. To make this arc convincing it needed to be written with a little more subtlety and slow build-up. But it is still worth watching (or re-watching).

### **Poultry Part Deux**

After *Star Trek* the chicken was nicely done, so we ate it, and did the cleanup, and then it was pretty much time for bed. Instead of a story, we took a few minutes to talk about how our respective days went, what we were grateful for, and what things we hoped to improve.

Grace and I are due to record a Pottscast this weekend and I'm getting worried about it. I feel very out of practice; I haven't made any progress on new intro and outro material.

## Saturday

### Joe Frank

I'm writing this Saturday evening. Today has been a bit difficult but we got a number of things done. I felt pretty sluggish yesterday; apparently the kids are working their way through yet another virus. On the drive home I was listening to Terry Gross interview Joe Frank.

I really want to track down some of Joe Frank's work; I wasn't familiar with it, but it seemed amazing. Sadly, the reason that this segment was running on Fresh Air is because he recently died.

Anyway, I was apparently a bit too deeply engaged in the conversation. As I stopped on Crane Road to get our mail before I turned down our little unnamed driveway, I started to step out of the car, failed to put it in park, and slid on the snow. It had warmed up so much that the snow was melting and had a slick layer of water on top of it. So with one foot out of the car and one foot in the car, I was losing my footing and falling, as the car started to drive away without me. I managed to catch myself and jump back into the car and get my foot on the brake before the car hit anything. But in the process I managed to apply torque to my right knee in a very painful way. In fact last night it was sore and swollen enough that I suspect I may have caused a small fracture or sprain. I iced it with a bag of frozen edamame and decided I would probably know more in the morning.

This morning it actually was a bit better, so I'm pretty sure there is no fracture or sprain, but just some touchy tendons that got yanked hard in directions they weren't prepared to go. It was also clear this morning that the twisting to my body affected everything from my right leg up to my left shoulder and into my neck.

So I woke up in some pain. Grace left early for a hair appointment. I soaked in a hot bathtub for a while and read more *Existence*, and made breakfast of bacon, fried eggs, toasted everything bagels, and the last of the multi-grain bread. When Grace got home I asked her to work over my upper back and neck for a while. That helped. I'm going to ask her to work it over a couple more times and we'll see how it feels tomorrow. I don't think there is anything that actually requires medical attention, though it is sore.

In years past, for this sort of thing I would go see a massage therapist named Ed Clark, and he would generally fix me up in one intense session of massage, popping everything back into place. I think he is retired now, although I'm not 100% sure. If this is still bothering me into next week I'll see if I can find someone to do what he used to do. Some of the pain might be body ache pain

associated with the virus the kids are fighting (and which I'm probably fighting now, too). The kids-as-virus-vectors thing is getting old.

After Grace got home, we managed to get everyone into the car and to Marsh View Meadows park where we've walked before. It was over 40 degrees and sunny and we have not managed to get the family out for a walk for a number of weeks now. Benjamin was very impatient and argumentative, but we still managed to walk for about an hour.

### **Recycle Ann Arbor**

After that we drove to the Recycle Ann Arbor Drop-Off Station to try to get rid of a bag of dead batteries: mostly single-use Eveready lithium batteries, a few dead rechargeable lithium batteries including an old ThinkPad battery, and a couple of small nickel metal hydride rechargeable batteries from cordless phones that the kids have destroyed. They don't make it easy. It's \$3.00 to get in, and for batteries you drive into the big building, a metal shed with a dirt floor. On their web site they claim that they take all lithium batteries, but the employee that helped us didn't think they took single-use lithium batteries. He advised me to put them into our regular trash.

That's a really bad idea, and I said so. He had to consult with his supervisor. They finally took them, by which I mean they told me to leave my bag of batteries sitting on a palette with some other miscellaneous electronic junk. I can't say that I'm filled with confidence that they will be recycled at all.

It should *not* be like this. Single use lithium batteries have been on the market for a number of years now. The producers should actually have a program to buy them back when they are dead, like returnable bottles and cans. And recycling stations should have flameproof containers designated for handling them.

After dropping off the batteries, we drove to Target. Grace, Elanor, Sam, and Benjamin stayed in the car while I went in with Veronica, Joshua, and Pippin. We were looking for a few things we couldn't get at Costco: Dr. Bronner's bar soap, travel-size toothpaste, California Olive Ranch olive oil, and unscented dishwasher pods. I made the mistake of letting the kids look at their video section.

I was considering coming home with a DVD of *Paddington*, the first movie, and *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, both on sale. But that turned into a fight when Veronica really wanted to buy a season of *Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* instead. That turned into a lecture from me about how, when I buy the kids a particular movie, it's because I'm *endorsing* that movie for them — I think it's OK for them to watch, maybe even educational, with some redeeming artistic or moral value (yes, even *Star Trek: The Next Generations* often allows us to have conversations about politics and ethics). I had no interest in the Ninjago franchise. In December they begged me for *The Lego Ninjago Movie* and I bought it for them, but it's a deeply dumb movie, and I regret buying it. So I

didn't want to buy them a whole season of the TV show.

Anyway, rather than fight about all that, I wound up putting back both movies I had chosen.

We also wanted to return some cans, which is strangely painful at Target. They don't have sorting machines. You have to take them to the customer service desk and wait in line. So several of my errands today involved returning and recycling, but increasingly I feel like I'm an odd man out for even attempting to do this. Is recycling obsolete, something only old people like me do now?

After Target, we drove to St. Francis church for Mass. Benjamin made it through most of it before he needed to rush to the bathroom. He was wearing a snowsuit and boots. Let's just say it was a close call. Afterwards communion was started and I did not want to walk him back through the sanctuary, so he had a meltdown, and then I had to drag him outside and walk around the church with him a couple of times until he calmed down.

After Mass, we drove through the drive through of Bear Claw Coffee and got some donuts and scones, so everyone had a snack to try to forestall further meltdowns while we got dinner ready (we knew that we were going to bake a pot pie from Costco, which takes 90 minutes). It was too little too late; as I started today's writing there was some kind of fistfight over a DVD in the family room. So they had to put away all the videos for tonight.

### **Dinner Gets Demolished**

When we were getting out of the car, we carefully instructed Sam to rush inside and get the oven heating up for our pot pie. We were very specific about the temperature: 375 degrees. We said "three hundred and seventy-five degrees" several times, and had him repeat it back to us until we were satisfied that he knew what temperature we wanted. But now we're sitting here staring at a badly burned pot pie that baked for over an hour at 475 degrees.

Then, as we were considering taking the crust off to see if the inside was edible, Sam was setting the table, and dropped a glass on the table, which shattered, spraying bits of glass all over the pot pie. So now we have to figure out if we're going to try eating it at all.

I'm going to wind things up there. Working with kids can be... difficult.

### **Media Discussed This Week**

*This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.*

- *Paddington 2* (2017 film)
- *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 5: "Riddles in the Dark" and Chapter 6: "Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire"



- *The Compleat Enchanter: The Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea* by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt
- *Existence* by David Brin
- *Star Trek: The Next Generation* Season 4, Episode 12: “The Wounded,” and Episode 21: “The Drumhead”
- *The Dark Tower 1: The Gunslinger* by Stephen King (2003 text)
- *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* by J. K. Rowling
- *More Alive and Less Lonely: On Books and Writers* by Jonathan Lethem.
- *The Lego Ninjago Movie* (2017 film)

*Paul R. Potts*

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan*

*The Week Ending Saturday, January 20th, 2018*

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