

## 2018 Week 41: The Week Ending Saturday, October 13th



Figure 1: Word Cloud

### Sunday

Last night we had a chicken and rice dish with carrots, mushrooms, and parsnips, cooked in the Instant Pot. That was quite good and well-received. Along with that we had a big salad with homemade dressing. The dressing consisted of Grace's homemade mayonnaise, a container of pre-made guacamole, grapeseed oil, white wine vinegar, and a little bit of brown sugar. With the salad we provided some extra toppings: diced hard-boiled eggs, oil-cured olives, diced beets, and blueberries.

### *Matilda* (1996 Film)

After dinner and cleanup I took the kids down into the basement with a bag of Costco popcorn to watch our DVD of *Matilda*, the 1996 film. The plot involves a young girl born into a family that doesn't understand her. She's gifted and loves to read. The scenes where she discovers her local library are beautiful. The film is funny in parts, but I found the portrayal of Agatha Trunchbull to be pretty disturbing. The plot, involving a murder mystery, is overly complicated, and the film is too long. I like the ugly home sets and dated cars and Danny DeVito's narration is fun. But ultimately the portrayal of several of the characters just

seems mean-spirited, and a lot of the physical comedy just feels like laughing at torture. I don't feel like I can recommend it. Grace stayed upstairs for a little peace and quiet and so I can't ask her what she thought of the film.

We were ready for bed early but Grace was not. So she and I did not actually get to sleep until about 2:00. I keep trying to stay on a consistent schedule but it falls apart on the weekends.

### **“Hotshot” by Peter Watts**

Since I couldn't go to sleep, I read the story “Hotshot” by Peter Watts, in the *Reach for Infinity* collection. Paging through this anthology, I remember reading most of the stories, but didn't remember much about that one. Either I didn't read it or I just didn't find it memorable. It introduces a couple of the characters that appear in *The Freeze-Frame Revolution*, particularly Sunday Ahzmundin, the protagonist of both. It follows Ahzmundin as she takes a brief sabbatical from her training for the *Eriophora*'s gate-seeding mission that will occupy the remainder of her life to plunge into the photosphere of the sun, because the powerful magnetic fields that twist and break there apparently have a deeply strange affect on the human mind — they supposedly allow the mind to actually manifest free will, apparently because in this environment neurons will fire on their own without deterministically responding to their inputs.

This requires some explanation, but I'm unfortunately really not the guy to provide it. Let's just say that Watts' ideas about consciousness don't come out of nowhere; he gets his ideas from cutting-edge biology, neuroscience, and philosophy. In *Blindsight* I followed his arguments pretty well because I was familiar with the “Chinese room” thought experiment, and other concepts from the field of artificial intelligence. I'm familiar with some of the more outré claims about how consciousness and free will arise in the brain, but I don't know antecedents he's referencing when he talks about magnetic fields and the brain. Unfortunately Watts does not provide an elaborate annotated bibliography for *The Freeze-Frame Revolution*. He probably talks about the antecedents for these stories on his blog. If you want to search for his posts in which he discusses the topics, go wild., but I'm not feeling up to it at the moment.

Watts actually makes a lot of his work available for download. You can find the full text of “Hotshot,” in the form of a PDF file, [here](#). In fact, you can also find the two other stories that are part of the Sunflower Cycle, “Giants” and “The Island.” “The Island” is the story that appeared in *The New Space Opera 2*. Yesterday I was griping that I didn't want to have to take apart a whole palette of boxes to dig out that book in order to read the story. It looks like I won't have to! Here's the page with links to the stories. I'll try to get both “Giants” and “The Island” read this week, and write up any thoughts.

### ***The Wrecks of Time* by Michael Moorcock, Concluded**

This morning I finished reading *The Wrecks of Time*, the first Moorcock novel in the *Traveling to Utopia* omnibus. I've mentioned before how I found this novel to be "Ballardian." It gets even more Ballardian. It's got references to Jung, archetypes, psychodrama, and other elements of sixties thought; there's even a brief reference to the grail, as well as a crucifixion scene that seems, really, like a pointless provocation. The end seems a bit abrupt and strange, but there are some beautifully odd scenes along the way, including one in which Faustaff comes across a giant "dump" of artifacts carefully piled up from all of human history — but brand new, not relics. This is the scene which is illustrated on the cover of the Arrow 1975 paperback edition of *The Rituals of Infinity*, where Faustaff winds a clock. I love that illustration — although technically it does not really illustrate the scene, as in the story the subspace earths don't all appear in the sky until the final chapter.

Anyway, I'd like to be able to recommend this Moorcock novel, but unfortunately I can't. It wasn't a complete waste of my time, since it is short and contains some interesting scenes. But while it is evocative in places, and the protagonist seems intriguing, it just doesn't develop him well enough, or tell an interesting enough story about him, to make it really worthwhile, and the unexamined sexism is off-putting. I'd actually recommend it more to fans of early *Ballard*, not fans of Moorcock. While it does show the origins of some of his later multiverse ideas, Moorcock never used the setting or the protagonist again, so the time spent getting to know both of them feels a bit wasted.

The next novella in this omnibus volume is called *The Ice Schooner*. Apparently Moorcock modeled the story of this novel after the Joseph Conrad novel *The Rescue*. It looks interesting, and I hold out hope that it is more fun than *The Wrecks of Time*. It also reminds me that I've been meaning to write a science-fiction novel called *The Escape Pods of the "Glen Carrig."*

### **Something is Rotten in Our Basement**

Something in the basement is producing a sulfurous smell. It's been growing for a week or so. At first I thought it must be a container of some kind of leaking cleaning supply, like drain cleaner. But it seems to be strongest in my office. I could not identify the smell or where it was coming from, so I asked Grace to go down and sniff around and see if she recognized it or could find the source. Grace thinks it's coming from the closet in my office that holds the sump.

This may need some professional attention. When the previous owner renovated the basement he made some improvements to the drainage system under the basement floor, and apparently removed the sump pump, since it didn't seem to be needed. Maybe a sump is needed. It is odd that this is the first time we've noticed it. We have had heavy rain recently, but we've certainly had heavier rains over the last year and a half. It's just another house thing to worry about. We've been planning to put in a radon system as money allows. Unfortunately

to get any work done in there I'll probably have to break down my computers and audio gear and move everything out of the room, which will require a lot of work and likely disrupt our podcast production.

Aside from the regular kitchen cleanup — and it already feels like I've spent half the weekend cooking and washing dishes — Grace had a bunch of small gardening tasks and errands to work on this afternoon. So it's already almost 4:30. She and I were supposed to have a money-planning meeting, but I'm not sure that is going to happen; we don't have a dinner plan yet, and we also want to get a podcast done. So I'm scratching my head a bit wondering how we can get everything done.

## Monday

Well, yesterday could have gone better, but at least we got a podcast out. Grace was out for several hours yesterday and so we missed the chance to sit down and plan out spending. She called me and had me put the pot roast on to cook, and it sat in the oven at 300 degrees for three hours, inside a dutch oven. It was quite delicious, although maybe just a bit over-done.

We discovered that Daniel had actually taken the salt-crusted rye loaf we bought the Saturday before last from the cabinet where we keep the bread, and hidden it. Fortunately those crusty breads last a long time without going moldy and it was still perfectly fine. So we ate that with the pot roast, along with a salad and leftover chicken and rice. I made a little beef gravy from the pan drippings, which helped out the pot roast.

## Recording the Pottscast

It was something like 10:30, after doing a round of kitchen cleanup and leaving some more hand-washing for Veronica, when Grace and I finally went downstairs to record the podcast. I had hoped to write an essay on the Kavanaugh nomination and read that, to at least organize my thoughts before we discussed it. That didn't happen. Grace and I hadn't really talked much in advance, so we weren't entirely on the same page as far as the points we wanted to make. The less we prepare, the longer we tend to run, so this was one of our longer shows. The only part that wasn't rambling was when Grace read the remarks she had prepared for the Front Porch Republic conference. Once again, given the actual constraints on our time, we had to decide whether to press on and do a show without much preparation, or miss another week. (Do we drive our audience away *passively*, by not releasing enough shows to keep them interested, or *actively*, by releasing shows that they don't like? Hmmm...)

We finished recording right at midnight, and it took me about an hour and a half to prepare and upload everything. Once again I am so grateful for the bash scripts I have put together to make this process easier. They help me stay on track and avoid stupid mistakes in the process, even when I'm not very alert.

I wasted a few minutes trying to catch up on Facebook — I spend very little time on Facebook these days. The evening ended on a frustrating note for me because I hoped to come upstairs to find the kids asleep and the lights off, so I could go right to sleep myself. But they had apparently fought Grace every step of the way over going to bed, and so everyone was awake. We had to set the alarm for 7:00, because Grace needed to get up to take our housemate to an appointment. So she was not going to get enough sleep, and neither was I, and we were both going to be starting the week off with our schedules all out of whack.

I managed to get a little bit more sleep after Grace got up and out the door this morning, but I'm still feeling logy. I had a nice lunch all packed with pot roast and gravy, chicken and rice, and salad, and I was even thinking about taking it out to the car before I left. But then I got distracted — Joshua got up to come and say goodbye — and I forgot all about my lunch. So it's still in the refrigerator. It should still be edible tomorrow. The salad will probably be a little worse for wear, although it's the bagged Asian chopped salad, which has a lot of cabbage in it, and the cabbage holds up better than lettuce.

I was running too late this morning to stop for breakfast, or even for a coffee. So I had tea and pop-tarts at the office.

I didn't get any reading done last night or this morning.

While I was downstairs last night, I opened up the closet in my office and pulled up the cover of the sump in the floor. I feared that it would be full of foul-smelling, moldy water, or a rotting opossum, or something like that. But it seemed completely dry and empty. It also occurred to me just what the smell in the basement reminds me of. It reminds me of the smell of some sort of spray pesticide that I recall smelling before — RAID canned wasp killer, which is a pyrethroid formula, or a pyrethrin spray that used by my ex-girlfriend's landlord long ago when their apartment wall was infested with bees. We have not used anything like that since moving into the house, and so I'm really wondering where this smell is coming from. Did the previous owner use a pesticide in the basement, and the smell is only now coming up from the sump? I'm stumped.

I didn't notice much in the way of effects from breathing the fumes while I worked on the podcast in the basement, although it does seem like my throat was a little irritated, and still feels irritated today.

### **“Giants” by Peter Watts**

The story “Giants” by Peter Watts can be found online on the Clarkesworld site here. This is a story set in the Sunflower Cycle universe and I found it to be quite good; better than “Hotshot.” It's about an episode in the long journey of the ship *Eriophora*. The story makes reference to an uprising on the ship. It sounds like the narrator might be Sunday, the narrator of *The Freeze Frame Revolution*. But this excerpt suggests otherwise:

Hakim turns to me as the Chimp lowers us toward the storm. “Maybe we should wake them up.”

“Who?”

“Sunday. Ishmael. All of them.”

So — Sunday is in hibernation. But there are eight million stories in the naked city — or, rather, thirty thousand stories around the naked singularity. And the story hints at several points that the point-of-view character may be something quite different than a standard “crewsicle.” In his Reddit “ask me anything” interview, Watts said:

Chronologically, the order is “Hotshot”; “The Freeze-Frame Revolution”; “Giants”; and “The Island”. But each was designed to be understandable whether or not you’ve read any of the others, and Sunday doesn’t even appear in all of them, so go wild.

So “Giants” takes place *after* *The Freeze-Frame Revolution*. That suggests that the uprising *was* by Sunday’s crew, and those folks may have been crewsicles for a while — or, to use Watts’ chilling word, “deprecated.” I guess it’s time to read “The Island” and see what else I can learn about the history of the *Eriophora*. (Incidentally, *Eriophora* is a genus of orb-weaving spiders... which is an evocative name, for a ship that is creating the gates that knit together a web-like transportation network... and also, a bit creepy. In other words, totally on-brand for Peter Watts.)

Grace had an appointment for Elanor at the eye doctor this afternoon, and so she brought my lunch, and brought it by my office about 4:00. I am grateful that she is able to help work around my dumb mistakes. Lunch was delicious.

Tonight if we can get through dinner at a reasonable hour, we should be able to watch the series premiere of *Doctor Who*. I have not read anything about the plot of the first episode, although I did see that the reviews seem to be quite positive.

## Tuesday

I went to Costco after work and picked up two rotisserie chickens, more salad, pork medallions, bread rolls, four dozen eggs, and a box of pancake mix. When I got home, Grace was out running an errand, but the kids had gotten the table set and a salad on. So we didn’t have to do much prep before eating — just put the groceries away. Pippin immediately got up on a stool, opened up the high cabinet where I had stashed them, pulled down the bag of bread rolls, opened them up, and ate one. I had bought them specifically so that the kids would eat last week’s sandwich meat for lunches this week, and dinner was on the table. That bought him some immediate consequences.

We started dinner without Grace. Pippin sat at the table, surly, and would not

touch the three *very* small servings of roasted chicken, salad, and rice on his plate. He has recently taken his food pickiness to a whole new level. I'm not sure what to do about him.

Grace finally got home. Her half-hour errand had turned into a two-hour errand when her friend did not show up to meet her as she expected. As soon as she sat down and told Pippin to eat, he ate. Of course it took him another forty minutes to eat six forkfuls of food, and everyone else was done. I'm furious that he will do this for Grace and not for me. I had already told everyone that we were canceling the evening's planned viewing of the series premier of *Doctor Who*. But he ate, eventually, and the kids did a pretty good job of cleaning up and getting ready, so we went ahead and watched "The Woman Who Fell to Earth." We watch TV shows from the iTunes store using my ThinkPad, with an HDMI cable running into our battered, modestly-sized LG display, and the audio output from the display running into my old Yamaha STAGEPAS 300 PA system (with the terribly noisy fan).

### ***Doctor Who* Series 11, Episode 1: "The Woman Who Fell to Earth"**

The show was pretty well-received by the Potts family. Overall, I thought the producers did a good job of avoiding a number of obvious pitfalls. Having seen the new Doctor's clothes, I was concerned that they were going to make her a "manic pixie dream girl," a "madcap" character, a Mary Poppins type whose job was to entertain and teach everyone with her zany-but-maternal emotional labor. They didn't really do that — thank God. Her outfit makes some sense in the context of a hurried race through a thrift shop's inventory, and her quest for pockets — lots of pockets — was set up in the show.

The ending, with its extended coda, felt a little needlessly slow to me. The lack of opening credits seemed odd. And it seemed odd that the Doctor's change of gender went almost unremarked. He's been a man for 55 years (thousands of years, in-universe), and is now suddenly, this time, a woman, with no comment, no explanation, and not even much lampshading of this change? We're to believe that the previous streak of 12 male incarnations were just due to a dozen consecutive coin tosses that all just happened to come out the same way? The show established a while back that it was possible for Time Lords to change genders (the Master morphed, brilliantly, into the Mistress). But is it just something that happens, perhaps every dozen regenerations or so? Is it predictable? Does the new gender tend to then "stick" for a number of regenerations? Do the Time Lord's wishes have any influence on it? This really cries out, to me, for some kind of in-universe explanation, but I have a feeling we aren't going to get one. I'm not sure the producers are really willing to shine a bright light on the way that the show was, for decades, an example of institutionalized, unexamined male supremacy.

The villain interested me more when I thought it was a giant ball of sparking tentacles, but unfortunately it turned out that the tentacles were just the villain's

pet. But my kids were hiding behind each other (there isn't a sofa, downstairs), so the monster of the week had its traditional effect, as is only right and proper. Personally, I'm generally hoping that the aliens will feel more alien.

They've set up a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* moment with the ending. Will they really go there? I don't know. It was interesting to have the TARDIS off-screen for the whole show. It would be an interesting change to make the whole series about the adventures of the Doctor and her new companions as they chase down the TARDIS, which has gone rogue for some reason. Will they do that? I don't know. But it seems like this series, and this new Doctor, are both off to a reasonably good start.

Oh, and I almost forgot — Grace and I both noted that we liked the music in this episode quite a bit. Atmospheric, and noticeable without being overbearing. It reminded me that in a lot of recent episodes the music hasn't really done much for the show.

### **Costco**

I need to go to Costco again tonight because last night we discovered that we have no more diapers. Grace had asked Veronica to go check in the closets and cupboards, and somehow she reported back that we had plenty, when in fact we had none; one cupboard actually contained an empty plastic bag that had been full of diapers, so someone took the last one, didn't say anything, and left the bag. Last night we had to dip into the emergency diaper stash that we keep in the car for road trips.

This morning someone had again gotten into the bread rolls, leaving two of them sitting out, one with just one bite taken out of it.

### **Our Strange Weather**

The weather's been strange. Strange seems to be the new normal. Florida is going to be hit by Hurricane Michael. There's a possibility that Michael will drop a huge amount of rain as it crosses the Carolinas, which have not even fully dried out from Florence. Meanwhile, it's been in the low eighties here, in the second week of October. That's not record-breaking for the region, but it feels unusual. The situation in Alaska and Siberia has been record-breaking, though. And there's a strange situation in Syracuse, New York, where they are breaking records for highest *low* temperature; Tuesday morning's low was 70°.

I'm aware of the special IPCC report on Global Warming of 1.5° C. Aware, but I don't have a lot to say about it; I've said a lot about this topic in the past, and I've pretty much talked and written myself out on the subject. Although maybe it's time to take it up again on the podcast.

The "A1" point in the outline of the "Summary for Policymakers" reads:



A1. Human activities are estimated to have caused approximately 1.0° C of global warming above pre-industrial levels, with a likely range of 0.8° C to 1.2° C. Global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate. (high confidence)

The only valid questions now are “what are we going to do about this?” We still have options to decarbonize and down-shift and avoid some of the most catastrophic warming, but as Elrond says to Arwen in *The Two Towers*, “that future is almost gone.”

I heard this morning that our friend Joy was in a bad car accident. Her car was totaled and she was apparently not badly injured, but is in pain with bruised ribs. I know what that feels like and it’s no fun.

Grace has a book club meeting tonight so I’ll be picking up a pot pie at Costco along with the diapers. She says she will be back about 10 p.m.

## Wednesday

Things were a bit confused when I got home. I had agreed with Grace that I would pick up a pot pie. But as I looked around Costco and thought about how long it takes to bake a pot pie, I decided instead to bring home packages of pre-cooked ribs and mashed potatoes instead. They also had those great macarons, so I bought a box of those for dessert. I also picked up a couple of bottles of wine. I will buy a bottle or two of wine on each trip for the next few weeks until I’ve got enough for the holidays.

How much is enough for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s? I don’t know for sure — I’m not really sure how many guests we will have for the meals. I don’t remember how many bottles I bought last year, and apparently I did not put the details in my blog posts. I think I got more than a dozen bottles, and fewer than two dozen. We didn’t finish them all by New Year’s Day, but that just meant we had a few spare bottles to pull out and drink with meals during the winter months, which wasn’t a bad thing. I’ll be picking up a variety — red, white, rosé, dry, sweet, from France, South Africa and other exotic locales — even Michigan.

I was considering bringing home single bottles of wines to taste-test, and then going back to get more of the ones we like. The problem is that Grace and our housemate are both pregnant. So the only adults available to drink them would be me, and our housemate’s boyfriend, who rarely joins us for meals. So I’d be storing opened half-full or three quarters-full bottles in the refrigerator. We don’t have room for that. It could be fun to invite some friends and have a wine-tasting party to help me pick what to buy for the holidays, but realistically with everything going on, I don’t think we will actually manage to do that. So I’m just going to put my faith in Costco’s wine buyers and take it as a given that all the wines they are selling are good enough to serve at our holiday meals,

taste-untasted.

Things were confusing with the trash and recycling. Monday was a Federal holiday, so we thought the trash and recycling wouldn't be picked up until this morning. That's why I was baffled when Veronica was rolling the trash bin down to Crane Road yesterday morning instead of evening: that was too late for Tuesday early-morning pickup, but too early for Wednesday early-morning pickup. But it seems like the trash was picked up during the day Tuesday after all.

When I got home, Veronica had put half the pork tenderloins in our stoneware baking pan at her mom's suggestion. Grace had had the same idea — that it would take too long to heat a pot pie — but she hadn't coordinated with me. So now we have a shit-ton of ready-to-heat food. We ate the salad, one of four packages of mashed potatoes, and the pork medallions. I don't think the stoneware baking pan was the right thing to use under the broiler. I think I heard it crack. But I didn't want to contradict Grace's instructions to Veronica.

Our housemate's girls joined us for dinner, but just picked at their food, and since they didn't finish their (very small) portions of meat or salad, I wouldn't give them cookies, which made them scream. But their mom told me that they had actually both eaten earlier and I should stand my ground on the issue of cookies.

Trying to damp down the screaming, or rather, my *response* to the screaming, and of trying to organize the meal without Grace around, I had a wee dram of scotch whisky. On a full stomach this had only a very mild effect, but it did actually help me sleep better than usual, although I did wake up feeling kind of gross.

Our housemate had completely clogged the vacuum cleaner again by sucking up pieces of paper, so after dinner I had to take that apart and clean it out again. I'm always baffled by the way that people think that since a vacuum cleaner seems like it *can* suck up larger things sometimes, that they *should* use it that way. I guess you only learn this lesson if you've ever been the person that has to fix them.

The oven is crusted with burned-on goo again, and no one will admit to making the mess. I forgot to clean that up, and I forgot to take the stoneware baking pan out of the oven, too, so I hope that no one heats up the oven with that thing still in there. I just have to hope there is not too much of a mess when I get home.

Grace did get home a little bit after ten o'clock and she had a good time at her book club, discussing *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. She had eaten, so the portion that I had set aside for her went into the 3-tier stainless steel tiffin for me to bring to lunch today.

I first learned the word "tiffin," by the way, after reading it in the foreword to Harvard Lampoon's parody *Bored of the Rings*:

Spring found us with decayed teeth and several pounds of foolscap covered with inky, illegible scrawls. A quick rereading proved it to be a surprisingly brilliant satire on Tolkien's linguistic and mythic structures, filled with little takeoffs on his use of Norse tales and wicked phoneme fricatives. A cursory assessment of the manuscript's sales appeal, however, convinced us that dollarwise the thing would be better employed as tinder for the library fireplace. The next day, handicapped by near-fatal hangovers and the loss of all our bodily hair (but that's another story), we sat down at two supercharged, fuel-injected 345-hp Smith-Coronas and knocked off the opus you're about to read before tiffin. (And we take tiffin pretty durn early in these parts, buckaroo.) The result, as you are about to see for yourself, was a book as readable as Linear A and of about the same literary value as an autographed gatefold of St. Simon Stylites.

I remembered that phrase about taking tiffin pretty durn early in these parts, but I couldn't remember where I read it. Google found it! And I'm reminded that it may be time to introduce my kids to *Bored of the Rings*.

### Old House News

Grace has forwarded our real estate agent's rough notes for a lease-to-own agreement to our attorney, who is looking them over. Last night I scanned our latest mortgage statement to send him, too. We're not sure the numbers are really going to add up. The idea is that our renter would pay us, and we'd continue to pay our mortgage (interest and principal), plus the monthly lump sum that goes into escrow for taxes, and our insurance. But we are only eight years into a thirty-year mortgage, so how we get to "and then the renter owns the house at the end of the lease period." To make that work, we would need to make additional principal payments each month to accelerate paying off the mortgage. According to one online calculator I found, we'd need to pay \$375.00 extra on the principal each month to pay the house off completely in ten years.

We've tried to make it clear that we're willing to pay *something* out-of-pocket each month to make this agreement work, and get out of having to pay \$965.04 (our current monthly lump sum for mortgage, interest, and escrow) plus energy bills, water bills, etc. Even if this requires that we borrow money to replace two furnaces, which will turn into a monthly payment. But I'm not sure we can make the numbers work out — and I'm not sure our renter can afford to pay, or wants to pay, all or at least most of what it would actually cost us each month to do this. So I think there's a good chance it will fall apart and very shortly we'll be trying to decide on a plan C, after plan A (selling the house) and plan B (leasing the house) have fallen apart.

### ***The Anatomy of Fascism* by Robert Paxton**

We had three stories last night: I read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to Benjamin. Joshua read a few more chapters in *George's Marvelous Medicine*. And then even though it was late, I really wanted to start reading *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Most of the kids had gone to bed by this point but Joshua stayed with us and listened. I read the first section of chapter 1, the introduction. It's slow going, especially since I made an effort to explain to Joshua a lot of the terms, like "dictator," and "syndacelist," and provide some background information on what labor unions are.

I said it is slow-going, but it's also pretty fascinating, and so once we got into it, I could not resist staying up until about 2:00 reading. Paxton is writing about how the early fascists emerged as a reactionary splinter of a group of leftists. There's a common right-wing talking point, spouted by people like Dinesh D'souza, about how the Nazis were really leftists and therefore, present-day American leftists are Nazis. It's laughable to a historian, but it gets traction in part because there is *some* historical truth to it; it seems that the early fascists *were* leftists, but peculiarly authoritarian leftists who decided that nationalism was a higher priority than internationalism. In the process they abandoned what I would call the *moral* principles of leftist thought — international solidarity, support for the vulnerable, opposition to war — while at the same time promoting *some* pieces of the leftist agenda, like universal suffrage, an 8-hour work day, confiscatory taxes, etc.

It's a strange and confusing story, but what *is* pretty clear is that by the time fascists had gotten into power, what they actually *did*, as opposed to what they said in their manifestos and propaganda, does not bear much resemblance to the to-do list of the traditional left. And so again while that right-wing attack of leftists as fascist has a grain of historical truth, it doesn't offer much insight into the fascist agenda; in fact, it obscures such insight. Which is precisely *why* the right uses it so disingenuously.

Anyway, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that I was turned on to this book by Matt Christman of Chapo Trap House. I've already thanked him on Twitter, for the episode in which he discusses the origins of fascism at length. It's episode 245, "Inebriated Past: The Monster Fash," and I recommend it, although it is a bit tough going, since he uses a lot of the vocabulary that historians and political scientists use, and a lot of those words are not in of common parlance (but they are worth learning, even if you have to pause the podcast and look up words).

I will thank him again on Thursday, in person, if I can.

I remembered to bring my lunch!

It looks like Hurricane Michael is going to hit Florida as a category 4 hurricane. At least that's the latest news I've seen.

## Thursday

I didn't wind up writing anything on Thursday at all, so I'm catching up on Friday. Mostly it was just a busy work day and I left early.

On Wednesday night we ate some of the ribs we didn't eat on Tuesday night. When I tried to clean up the stoneware baking pan, I discovered that it had, in fact, cracked. It was a small crack, but when I tried to wash up the pan, water must have gotten into it, and the crack very quickly grew, and then the pan just sort of fell into two pieces. So we really destroyed that thing quickly. Oops. If we get another one of these, we'll have to study up on how to use them. Clearly this was not the right way. It might be best to reserve it for cookies. A little quick Googling reveals that we're not the only people ever to have cracked one of these things.

My father called and left a message, although again as sometimes happens, my phone didn't actually ring. I called him back. I just brought him up to date about the situation with the house in Saginaw, and how the kids are doing. I told him (and I don't think I've told *you* yet) that our health insurance is going to cover Sam's speech therapy. That's great news. He brought me up to date on what he's up to, but I'll leave him and his wife, my stepmother, their privacy. I really have little to no sense of personal privacy at all, but I'm trying to remember that not everyone is like me.

## Twitter

My Twitter presence has grown a bit, abruptly, and it was kind of startling. There have been some improvements that have made Twitter much more worthwhile for me. First, Twitter on the web now allows users to get a chronological feed of their follower's posts again. That feature has been screwed up for some time by the way Twitter forces you to view what their algorithm selects for you. Wired has an article about it here.

It now works more like Twitter used to work, a decade ago. This gives me more power to curate my own feed by selecting who I'm following, with fewer tweets from outside my group of followers stuck in my timeline by algorithms, and now fewer tweets from my followers wind up never appearing in my timeline.

And I think this has consequences, because for the first time ever, I've had a tweet get some high engagement numbers. Well, high for me, that is. I happened to see a post early enough to make some of the first comments on it, and that post became popular. Therefore, my comments got a lot of "impressions" — that is, views on other people's timelines. One reply to a post got me 17,417 "impressions." And this led to 116 "engagements" — likes or replies. This was actually quite startling, because I suddenly had a lot of responses: 76 likes, 8 replies, etc. Typically, over the last year or so, most of my tweets get very few impressions and no "engagements" at all.

In fact, I usually get so little response that I've never had a real reason to study

my Twitter Analytics before. I didn't even really know all this information was here. I've been on Twitter for a decade. In 2018 there weren't a lot of features like this.

Oh, and I've gotten some new followers out of it.

I don't know for *certain* that the feed changes led to this, but it seems plausible.

All that said, I still don't know what I'm doing with Twitter, or whether it is worthwhile. I'm really on it to promote the podcast and share ideas with fellow travelers, and even meet people to have as guests on the podcast. Overall I'm not sure how effective it really is for that — but I don't know where *else* I'd do this kind of thing. It is addictive but also constantly makes me feel like I'm wasting my time.

## Friday

### Chapo Trap House Live at the Majestic Theater

Last night Grace and I went to see Chapo Trap House do their thing live in Detroit at the Majestic theater.

Just what their live “thing” is, is a bit hard to categorize. It's sort of like political improv comedy, but as a group. I'm scratching my head a bit. There are some historical precedents. I'm thinking of Will Rogers making jokes about what he had read in that day's newspapers, and comics like Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks, and also Marc Maron's run doing “Morning Sedition” on Air America. The group format allows them to riff off each other, and also takes a little of the pressure off the performing situation, for the individuals. It's still a bit of a high-wire act, though — the whole *group* can fail to be funny, and be stuck trying to get through a segment or talk about an article that just isn't working.

And, yeah, that happened, although things picked up in the second half of the show. I'll come back to that in a moment. But first, yesterday I arranged to leave work a little earlier than usual and got on the road about 5:45, having planned to get home about six, so we could leave in time to get a bite to eat and then drive to Detroit.

What actually happened is that I was stuck in traffic for a while: even at 6:00, traffic on I-94 gets bad and slows to a crawl. Grace had a similar problem driving Joshua and Pippin back from their choir practice. So we both got home about ten or fifteen minutes after six. Our sitter was there, but Grace had a hard time getting moving yesterday, and she was not ready to leave. So she had to do some washing up, and I waited around for another half-hour or so, and we didn't actually pull out of our driveway until almost seven.

### The Theater

We found the Majestic Theater without too much difficulty, although it was a bit confusing because the theater is under construction, the only visible signage

refers to the Magic Stick and the attached bowling alley, and the bulk of the building is hidden behind construction barriers. I really don't know my way around Detroit and didn't know where to park. Everything was confusing to me. It didn't help that I was hungry. We found street parking, which appeared to be un-metered, around the block, but we did in fact have to pay at a machine where we punched in our license plate number and fed it a credit card. I've never seen a system of signage and parking payment machines quite like this, but it seemed to work all right.

Walking around Woodward is kind of cool — downtown Detroit has streetcars now. Some of the small apartment buildings in the area are quite gorgeous. So this of course got us talking about “would have, could have, should have” — under what circumstances we might have considered moving to Detroit. The answers were still, basically, “in a different life.” In this life, we were intrigued by the homes in Indian Village, but I was absolutely horrified by the condition of the road infrastructure that would have been part of my daily commute to this job, and at that point we were also deeply in debt, with nothing we could have used to make a down payment on a mortgage, even a modest mortgage. So we didn't pursue it. And I'm still really glad I don't have that commute. If the job I'd found had been close to Indian Village? Well, I might have been more interested in pursuing that living arrangement for my family.

The inside of the theater, under construction, is a pretty weird and unfinished place. There was a men's room attendant, which I have to say I've only ever seen in movies. I had no cash, and so unfortunately I did not tip him. (I'm told you're now supposed to tip a men's room attendant five dollars for handing you a paper towel to dry your hands — what? That's more than the tip I usually leave my waitress when I get breakfast out, and I think of myself as a generous tipper.)

The doors opened at 8:00 and the tickets did not indicate what time the show would actually start. So we dithered a bit over whether we wanted to leave and go get some food. We had wristbands and had gotten our hands stamped so that we could get back in, but I did not want to lose our seats. We probably needn't have worried about that; the Chapo audience was almost Presbyterian in the way they filled up the seats from back to front, rather than the other way around. I went out to walk down the block and see what food was available while Grace held our seats. There was a small Chinese place which was crowded, with a line out the door. There was a McDonald's. I've made it the habit of decades never to darken the door of any McDonald's — it's such a long-standing habit that I'm not even sure I would have been able to walk through the door. There was a liquor store across the street, but with the construction blocking the sidewalk I would have had to walk some distance to cross at the light. I didn't want to miss the start of the show. So I decided not to hunt for food any further and went back to the venue.

It turns out there is a restaurant attached to the bowling alley right next door, but I didn't know that at the time.

## The Show

The show started with video clips, including the gruesome clip from the original *Robocop* movie (set in Detroit), in which Emil is drenched in toxic waste and then splattered by a car. There were a couple of other clips during the show; at one point they made it look like QAnon was “hacking” the video feed, with a video clip of computer graphics and a voiceover by James Adomian. That was fun. But most of the show was, basically, “Chapo reads the news,” with the group seated, Will Menaker in the rightmost chair (from the perspective of the audience). The rest of the group on stage were, in right-to-left-order, Virgil Texas, Felix Biederman, Amber A’Lee Frost, and Matt Christman.

In the first half, they meandered a bit, rambling about Detroit, talking about the gruesome news story about Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and legal resident of the United States, allegedly dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, his remains spirited out of the building in diplomatic pouches. That does not seem to have been proven with any evidence yet, but it’s a pretty horrible allegation; in any case, he has not been found, alive or dead, whole or in pieces.

## We Went to a Fight, and a Podcast Broke Out

They read a long article about James Kirchik and his failed bid to get onto the Yale Corporation Alumni Fellow ballot. This segment didn’t really work for me; I don’t know who he is and I really don’t care a lot about these folks. There’s some humor to be had from simply mocking someone like this, but not that much. And it went on and on. At one point some hecklers in the crowd started yelling at the stage. I *think* they might have been asking the Chapo gang to do the “Yale Alumni” roll call they did in a live show in Hamden, CT, and included in episode 246. But I am not positive about that. I *think* Felix heard “Yale alumni” and thought that maybe the people doing the yelling were Yale alumni. There was more yelling, the show ground to a halt, and Felix then stood up and sort of... well, to be blunt, he started screaming obscenities at the hecklers. I guess that’s one form of traditional left-wing discourse.

For a moment it looked possible that the show might come to a premature end then and there. The dark side of my personality found that part pretty fun, actually — I always like getting to a moment in a live show when it sort of “hangs by a thread” and I’m not sure what is going to happen next. But of course I’m glad that there was not actually a fight; that’s never as much fun in real life as is in movies and TV shows. I *think* theater security may have escorted the hecklers in question out, but I’m not entirely sure. Anyway, shortly after that Will ended the first half of the show and they ran a pretty funny fake ad for “Chapo Brain Worm Pills.”

In the second half the group got a little more traction with the audience. They talked about an article by Thomas Friedman, a reliable source of laughs for the left, who has been spouting off about how America is actually in the midst of a



civil war. So it was fun to hear the gang eviscerate that blowhard for a while.

Overall, it wasn't a great show, but it had a certain rawness and realness to it that I appreciated.

When the show ended the Chapo folks took a brief break and then came out for a book signing. There was a long line, and Grace and I had to decide what to do next. Whatever it was, she didn't want to stand in line. I actually already own two copies of the book — an “advanced uncorrected proof — not for sale” copy and a regular hardcover edition. I had planned to bring one of them to the show, but wound up leaving both of them at home. Really, I guess I just didn't care all that much about getting the book signed. I would have liked to say hello to Matt and thank him for his “Inebriated Past” shows, but I didn't want to wait an hour to do that.

### **A Terrible Meal Out**

So instead Grace and I went looking for food, and found people walking back towards the theater with pizza slices in little triangular cardboard boxes, and so discovered that the bowling alley next door has a pizza parlor attached. We ordered a Greek salad for Grace, with chicken, and an order of cheese fries for me. While the waitress tapped out our order on an iPad or something like it, Grace confirmed with her twice that she had ordered chicken on her salad. Then after I ordered my fries, I asked her a third time. Yes, she said. Yes. Yes. There would be chicken!

The food took a long time to arrive. I think it was over thirty minutes. And when it showed up, Grace's salad was pretty awful — she had me taste the beets. It was warm and wilted and looked not only unappetizing, but like a food poisoning risk. Oh, and there was no chicken. I repeat, there was no chicken. We dug through the whole salad. There was no chicken.

Knowing that we are typically more likely to get food poisoning from vegetables, especially lettuce, than from fries or a burger, Grace tasted my fries — they were average but had nothing wrong with them — and asked the waitress to bring her a plain order of fries instead. Her fries arrived *very* quickly. I think the waitress was a bit mortified. She still got a tip. She should have double-checked that the order was correct. I think we can hold her responsible for that, but the quality of the food and the speed of prep wasn't her fault, so we couldn't really hold that against her. I suppose we shouldn't have expected much from bowling alley food — but Grace and I fondly remember CUBS' A. C., a restaurant attached to a bowling alley which had pretty good food, including terrific French onion soup. So I guess we have been spoiled.

Grace drove us home (it's a bit confusing, and easy to get on the wrong freeway). We got in about 1:00. We paid the sitter. We were not ready to go right to bed. Several kids were awake, and we wanted to digest our food a bit. So we actually got the lights off about 2:15.

It's actually pretty impractical and expensive for Grace and I to have dates like this, and this is why we don't do it very often. But it's always nice to spend time with her. Even spending time seeing a weird and uneven live show that involved hecklers, a long drive, and a terrible meal out.

### **Renting Out the House**

We've had our attorney draft a lease agreement for us to send on to our realtor in Saginaw, who is hoping to rent out our house. This is complicated, and we'll still be on the hook for some big expenses, but — it might be the least bad option. So we'll see what she thinks of the agreement. If we can't make this arrangement work, it's not clear what our "plan C" should be. We have one or two more things to think over, and if none of them are workable at all, it's probably time to let the bank deal with it.

This evening we'll get our usual dinner and maybe watch a movie in the basement, if chores are done on time.

### **Saturday**

We got to bed very late on Friday night. I went to Costco after work and got a pretty standard load of groceries including the salmon we usually get for Friday dinner. Everything took forever once I got home, though. The kids were scattered and Grace was feeling too tired to come out and do much. But we finally got dinner together. Our housemate steamed asparagus, and Veronica made a pot of rice and baked the salmon. Since it was taking so long, it occurred to me that I would have enough time to chill a bottle of white wine, so I put one of the bottles I'm considering serving at Thanksgiving into the freezer for a while.

### **Badenhorst Secateurs Chenin Blanc 2017**

It's a white wine from South Africa, a Badenhorst Secateurs Chenin Blanc 2017. The bottle has a distinctive label with a hand-printed look. Previous years have gotten high scores from wine magazines, but I didn't think it was all that special. It's certainly not a bad wine, but the Chenin Blanc we had during the summer was much better (and unfortunately I'm not sure I wrote down exactly what that was, although I must have taken a picture of the bottle, so I'll see if I can find it). Anyway, this one was quite a dry white, pale, with flavors that lean towards the mineral side. Its *terroir* is Swartland which is a dry region, with a lot of shale and granite, where the vineyards are on hillsides. That probably contributes to the minerality, although I would have expected grapes grown in a dry region to yield more concentrated flavors. I can't really recommend this one, but since it was only a ten-dollar wine it wasn't a bad value for the money. I think there are much better bottles of Chenin Blanc out there, and probably even better bottles from the region.

We were just too scatter-brained and slow getting cleaned up last night to have a proper bedtime story. Grace and I stayed up way too late on social media.

### **A Conversation with the Heckler?**

On Twitter I wound up in a conversation with a guy who claims that he was the heckler at the Chapo Trap House show. The facts are confusing; the Chapo gang released an episode in which they mentioned the incident at the end. They said that, like us, they couldn't really *hear* what was being shouted at them; the sound from the seats was too echoey. They said that after the show, security told them that the guy who started shouting was a Yale alumni. But the guy who posted on Twitter said he was not a Yale alumni, he was just sick of the Yale alumni story because it wasn't working. I agree with him that it wasn't going over well. Grace, seven months pregnant, was quite angry that some of them were smoking in the venue; that's not even legal in Michigan. That may have been edgy but it didn't show much solidarity. Heckler guy also said he thought Matt was quite drunk, which may have been true, and that Virgil was staring at his phone while on stage, which I didn't notice but might have been true as well; there are audience pictures from other shows in which Virgil is staring at his phone. Maybe that's supposed to be "edgy" too.

I'm still mulling over what I think of the whole show. It probably was one of the weaker shows on their tour. From the excerpts of other shows they've put in the podcast, it seems like some have gone much better. But I'm wondering what the gang thinks about the tour now; was it a good idea? Would they do it again? I think it's legitimate to ask whether their success with the podcast may have misled them into believing that they could really pull off live shows in front of good-sized audiences, successfully convincing the audience members that it was worth the drive and twenty-five bucks to hear them do material that had a good chance at being hit-or-miss. Different members of the group seem to have very different levels of comfort and experience with live audiences, and that shows. I think for the most part they are all making a good-faith effort, but that's no guarantee of success.

I think the whole thing might have gone over better if they actually had a *prepared* segment of some sort, in which they all talked about who they are and what they believe. They aren't monolithic. Amber always displays more emotional solidarity and compassion for people of all classes, which I really appreciate. So I guess one way I could label my *own* brand of leftist thought would be to call myself a Frostkyist sympathizer.

### ***The Ice Schooner* by Michael Moorcock**

We didn't get up very early. I managed to read for a while. I'm about a third of the way through *The Ice Schooner*, and so far I'm enjoying it quite a bit, but Moorcock has disappointed me a couple of times with novels that don't really come together and finish well. So I'm not going to hazard a guess as to what

I'll think of the novel by the time I get to the end. I appreciate the fact that it seems to be an allegory about climate change... published in 1969. I don't know for sure if Moorcock was aware of the science on anthropogenic global warming that was known at the time, although he might have been. There was a growing body of research predicting possible effects, including the catastrophic loss of the Antarctic ice sheet.

I made pancakes using the Kodiak Cakes mix from Costco. I tried putting the blueberries in after the pancakes had set on one side. This seemed to work better, although I probably put too many blueberries in each pancake. I like it when they burst from the heat, but that wasn't happening the way I like it. I'd wind up flipping them and the pancakes would be finished, but the blueberries hadn't burst yet. So my blueberry pancake technique still needs a little work. The Kodiak Cakes mix is mostly wheat flour, unlike the Birch Benders mix. The Birch Benders mix tastes good if you burn it a little bit. The Kodiak Cakes mix doesn't. It gets bitter.

While I was working on pancakes, Grace drove down to Milan to pick up bread from Mother Loaf. We were running pretty late, so she just made it. Grace isn't eating dairy, but she brought me the last bialy. This week's masterpiece was stuffed with ricotta, shallots, and capers. It was delicious, although it would have been better right out of the oven. We got pan au levain (that's just the basic, classic sourdough). They also had a special 100% rye, sold by the pound rather than the loaf, so we got some of that to try.

### **A Visit to Stella Matutina Farm**

When we got breakfast cleaned up we drove out to our friends' farm. Grace wanted to pick up some eggplant, because we had a plan for our friend Susan to come over this evening and make a sort of "eggplant enchilada" thing — rolled-up slices of eggplant stuffed with ricotta cheese and prosciutto, and baked with sauce.

We got there quite late and so we didn't have much time to spend, but we're still very glad we went. The kids immediately went feral for a while and played with our friends' kids. Grace and I had cups of strong black coffee with our friend Bonnie and finally started to feel like we had woken up. Grace went out with Bonnie to pick eggplant, then I went out to explore their garden beds. They are growing amazing peppers — purple sweet peppers, jalapeño, cayenne, and more. They have a huge bed of nasturtium, some gorgeous rainbow chard, and a big crop of Brussels sprouts on the way. This has been a poor growing year and things are behind, but if it goes well they will soon have, as Michael put it, "a shitload of Brussels sprouts." So we have that to look forward to. On the drive out, I tried playing the soundtrack to *Arrival*. That's hard to listen to in the car; it gets too quiet to hear well. So I switched to U2's album *Achtung Baby*.

### ***Achtung Baby* by U2 (1991 Album)**

I've been missing this disc for a while, although I had the case. It turns out that in 2018 I still had not ever heard this complete album, although I had heard a couple of singles from the album. It's one of their better albums. You can hear Eno's influence, but it is toned down from his work on *The Unforgettable Fire*, an album which I think has a few great songs but a lot of dull, over-produced, overly atmospheric sections. *Achtung Baby* is more an album of real songs — songs with a lot of texture in places, filtered vocals and a lot of effects on percussion and guitar, but songs nonetheless. I was joking that the song "Zoo Station" sounded like The Edge was playing inside an oil drum and Bono was singing through a box fan. I also commented that even in 1991 a lot of bands were still essentially reproducing sounds originated by the Beatles; the vocal on "Zoo Station" reminds me of John Lennon's vocal on "Tomorrow Never Knows," played through a Leslie speaker. This album also has the song "Until the End of the World," a song I first heard in the movie of the same name. That's long been a movie that I was fascinated by — it's an interesting failure of a film. But that's a topic for another day.

### **A University of Michigan Football Game Day**

It was a football game day today, but we managed to avoid game traffic for the most part. There were planes buzzing around the stadium dragging banner ads — it's been so long since we've seen them that Grace didn't remember what they were. These are a crazy dangerous way to do advertising.

We saw what we think was the visiting team's buses, going the other way on I-94, bracketed by a police escort. According to the schedule I just looked up online, the visiting team was the Wisconsin Badgers, although I didn't even know there was a football team called the Wisconsin Badgers, so please fact-check me if you care to.

I was going to change the light bulb in the bathroom, and I thought that I must have some spare LED bulbs somewhere. But when I tried to find one, I realized that all my spares seem to be the BR30 shape, which is what all our kitchen and basement fixtures use. So I'll have to go find spares, and now I've got a toxic CFL bulb to dispose of. There's another CFL out in our bedroom. Those things just never lasted as promised; they were a huge con.

It's after 7 p.m. and getting dark out; our friend canceled, because she became ill and didn't want to risk giving our children a virus. That's disappointing, but we're still making eggplant lasagna. I'm going to wind this up and post it. We'll probably have time to watch something in the basement tonight — maybe another episode or two of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, or *Babylon 5*. The kids probably want to re-watch the first episode of the new series of *Doctor Who*. I don't really feel like I need to watch it again, but I won't fight them over it. We'll probably watch the next episode Monday night.

## 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.*

- *Matilda* (1996 film)
- “Hotshot” by Peter Watts
- *The Wrecks of Time* by Michael Moorcock, in *Traveling to Utopia* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)
- “Giants” by Peter Watts
- *Doctor Who* Series 11, Episode 1: “The Woman Who Fell to Earth”
- *The Anatomy of Fascism* by Robert Paxton
- *The Ice Schooner* by Michael Moorcock, in *Traveling to Utopia* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)
- *Achtung Baby* by U2 (1991 album)

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan*

*The Week Ending Saturday, October 13th, 2018*

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