

# Cold Spring Arbor

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## Sunday

It's Mother's Day and there's a lot going on, so by necessity this newsletter is going to be brief. There's a lot going on today. I considered just skipping today and writing something tomorrow, but I'm pretty sure tomorrow will be busy, too. I'm beginning to wonder how I ever found time for a full-time job — how, and especially, why.

Today we were able to get out and walk a couple of miles in our neighborhood. It's been a strange week. Our gardening plans are on hold because we're having nights below freezing. We have had to bring most of our herbs and flowers inside. I'm eagerly waiting to plant all kinds of culinary herbs in our kitchen garden, but I can't do it yet.

Today Grace and I got out for a walk. I went out in a short-sleeved shirt, since it was quite warm today, and had been sunny for much of the day, but it has also been snowing, just a bit. I had baby Malachi on my back in his backpack baby carrier. Grace pushed Elanor in the jog stroller. The weather was lovely as we set out. Then it started raining. And so for a time it was sunny and raining at the same time, and then just raining, and then sunny again. We weren't really cold, even after getting wet, because it wasn't windy. But then there was a tremendous windstorm, with branches snapping and falling everywhere.

There's never a dull weather moment here, these days!

I will write briefly on some of the things that have been going on, and then it will be time to cook dinner. There are steaks sitting in the refrigerator waiting to sear in a cast-iron pan. We don't eat steaks very often — in fact, it's been a few months — but this is Grace's day so we got some very nice sizzler steaks from Vestergaard Farm and they've been in the freezer waiting for today. Meanwhile, the kids are prepping turnip greens and beet greens, cooking whole potatoes in the Instant Pot to get them ready to mash, and baking bread.

I managed to watch an opera streamed for free by the Metropolitan Opera. This one was a contemporary opera by a Finnish composer, Kaija Saariaho, called *L'Amour de Loin*. It had the strange honor of being, apparently, only the second

opera by a female composer the Met has staged, and the previous one was in 1903.

Unfortunately, while the minimalist staging, involving strings of LED lights, was very pretty, and it had some interesting moments, it was not very good. I found the music to be almost melody-free, with a few notable exceptions where it became beautiful, and the plot and characters left me indifferent. I would love to write a scathing review, but it will have to wait, and my heart isn't really in it, because while it wasn't very good, it also wasn't very bad. So it falls into that sort of no-woman's-land (see what I did there?) of artistic works that don't deserve either scathing or glowing reviews, and those are really the only kinds of reviews I find fun to write.

## **Footnote to Appendix A**

Grace saw her doctor last Monday for some further investigation of the abdominal pain that led us to worry about appendicitis. The problem seems like it might originate in her uterus, which has taken a beating over the course of four caesarian deliveries. This all seemed to come on in the lead-up to her first full menstrual period since delivering Malachi, our youngest Potts baby. It seems that she may have a fistula (literally a hole) on the side of her uterus, so that as her uterus ramped up for her period, it began leaking blood into her abdomen. This pooled in there and formed a clot, like a giant bruise. The pain is similar to the pain she had with complications from her gall bladder surgery years ago — no fun at all. Her body is cleaning up the mess and the pain is diminishing now. This theory will be tested again when it is time for her next period. If this is clearly the problem, I'm not entirely sure what the solution is, but it would probably involve surgery of some sort to repair the fistula. So we will be nervously watching the situation and hoping that it will resolve or at least improve. It's never a good time to need surgery, but this year seems to be worse than usual.

## **Food Benefits**

We managed to get our WIC benefits straightened out enough to allow us to go to Kroger and buy some groceries covered by WIC — produce, tortillas, cheese, rice cereal, lentils, and other foods we can make good use of. So that is encouraging. But meanwhile we've been receiving confusing letters regarding our SNAP benefits. They have lowered our monthly payment, allegedly because our son Isaac is no longer living with us; we last had SNAP benefits back then. Isaac hasn't been living with us for seven years. But we've had three more kids since then.

Do older kids get more money and younger ones get less, such that having a teenager accounts for far more than three young children? It's not really clear. And because these services are swamped, it's impossible to get a person on the phone to answer our questions. But we still are getting food assistance, and that's a big help.

Meat shortages, of pork in particular, are starting to become very noticeable in stores, but so far we've been able to find things like oxtails, ham hocks, bacon ends, and other meats we can use to add flavor (and protein) to dishes like black-eyed peas and greens.

## Arrivals

Several packages have shown up — we're relying on deliveries for a lot of things we might normally go buy. For example, there are several music stores within an hour's drive that probably have the "hard tension" nylon strings that my Godin guitar uses, but I ordered them from Sweetwater.

I mentioned previously that I had ordered several used volumes of the *Collected Stories of Robert Silverberg* from a used bookstore in Georgia, at prices that seemed too good to be true. All five volumes arrived. They actually are copies of the nice Subterranean Press uniform edition, nicely-made sewn hardcover books with heavy paper. The four inexpensive copies are actually library discards. So, a couple of them have stamps on the edges of the page block, and there were some stickers and security tags, and in one case an old-fashioned card pocket. Some of the volumes have some slight "soiling" as they say in the trade. I was able to remove everything except the stamp marks and with various erasers cleaned up the marks as best I could. Most of the various stickers came off so nicely there is no evidence that they were there. The card pocket was hard to get out and it left a bit of visible damage, but only a bit. All five volumes look absolutely fine. I've seen shop-worn new copies of books on bookstore shelves that looked worse. One volume has a little bit of stitching pulled out and a slightly loose signature. I'm pretty sure it would be possible to get this repaired at some point, but it's not urgent. In short, I'm delighted with these books.

I've been reading some of the stories in the first volume, *To Be Continued* (yes, that's the title) to the kids at bedtime. Silverberg's earliest stories date to 1953 — he started publishing stories at a *very* young age, and continued to publish stories and novels over the next sixty years or so, gradually winding down after 2000, but still publishing non-fiction and editing his *Collected Fiction* into the 2010s. I recall Silverberg more for some of his novels than his stories: I vividly remember *Dying Inside*, a terrific novel that showed me that it was possible for a genre novel to be quite "literary" too. I also remember reading several of the Majipoor novels, although a lot of details have faded. I've probably read many of the stories in these collections, and am looking forward to rediscovering them.

The candy arrived from Public Displays of Confection in Florida. The kids love to watch their candy-making videos, so enjoyed the chance to taste some of the candy they make using vintage hand-cranked candy-making hardware. We tried several kinds. The sunflower "image candy" is transparent with tiny images of sunflowers in the center of each piece. That has a very nice light honey flavor. Their "Babel Fish" candy is a drop candy: the candymaker rolls strips of flavored hot sugar through a set of hand-cranked metal wheels that squeeze it into small

fish-shaped cavities in the wheels. The result is strips of little fish candies with thin sugar flash connecting them. The candymaker then picks up the strips and drops them onto the cooling table, and the fish-shaped “drops” break free of the flash. The cute little fish are sour lemonade flavor, nice and tart, made with citric acid crystals. These were my personal favorite of the kinds we tried. There were also humbug candies, and root beer, and coffee, and a “rare flavor assortment” with flavors such as nectar and rose. The root beer and coffee were also very good. In my opinion the “rare flavors” were all too subtle for my tastes — I like candy that is very sour or has a very strong mint or licorice flavor.

Per pound, the candy from Public Displays is no bargain — it comes in 2.75-ounce bags. But we certainly regret letting the kids watch the candy-making videos and pick out the flavors they wanted to taste. We can’t take them to see the hot sugar made into candy in person, but this is the next best thing. We might try some simple candy-making at home, but making real hard candy is tricky and a bit hazardous to do in a home kitchen. The candy-makers in the videos make it look easy, but they are handling, with their gloved hands, many pounds of hot sugar that are much hotter than boiling point of water — over 300 degrees Fahrenheit — to drive out all the water. I’m sure if you could get a good look at their hands, you would see evidence of plenty of burns acquired while learning their craft.

## Music

I’ve now sent out, via Marco Polo, live recordings of the following songs:

- “Wildfire” by Michael Martin Murphy
- “Rocky Raccoon” by The Beatles
- “Between the Wars” by Billy Bragg
- “Bizarre Love Triangle” by New Order
- “What’s Up” by Three Non Blondes
- “Under the Milky Way” by The Church
- “America” by Simon and Garfunkel
- “I Melt With You” by Modern English
- “The Space Race is Over” by Billy Bragg
- “Help Save the Youth of America” by Billy Bragg
- “Heaven” by Talking Heads
- “The Rainbow Connection” (from *The Muppet Movie*)

That’s a dozen! Marco Polo isn’t ideal for this. The audio quality is pretty terrible, and I don’t have a good way to improve it. My phone is filled up with video files but the app doesn’t seem to offer any way to remove them. I’ve added a memory card, but it doesn’t seem to be possible to tell the app to store video files on the card instead of the internal memory. I’ll probably just have to delete all the outgoing video clips. But it’s been a good exercise, recording a song every day (every weekday, at least). I get limited time to practice, so I practice as best I can, and then my time’s up — I just have to push record. If I manage to make

it to the end of the song at all, even with mistakes, I send it.

I'm also streaming some of my practice sessions on Facebook. The audio is still terrible, although I've managed to make a few improvements. Further improvements would probably require some additional gear. This product has a budget of zero, or nearly zero; I did buy some guitar strings and order some capos.

If anyone wanted to send me an SSL Logic SiX mixer, and/or a Fender Acoustisonic Stratocaster, and/or a Rickenbacker 1993 Plus, I certainly wouldn't turn these things down, and could probably put them to good use improving my sound on Facebook and/or YouTube, although I don't think I can get much better audio quality out of Marco Polo — my phone's built-in microphone, combined with heavy compression, just isn't going to produce terrific audio.

Meanwhile, any requests for next week?

## Opening Up?

Michigan is still “locked down” for the rest of May, but many states have either released some restrictions already, or are planning to do so very soon. I've read the CDC “stages” document, which looks like it heavily informed Michigan's document, which I've also read. There are a lot of problems with uncontrolled “opening up” — without widespread testing, and without contact tracing — especially in states which have never adequately put controls in place to limit the spread of illness, and so really haven't even flattened the growth of cases yet, but are apparently just going to start congregating and shopping and working together as if the pandemic were over. That's a recipe for disaster in some states and counties.

I've heard that some of the engineers in my employer's Ann Arbor office are being recalled from furlough, because sales of the Michigan Ultrafast Optoelectronics division haven't really collapsed much. The engineers will be working at home as much as possible, and taking the expected precautions when in the office. So I'm cautiously optimistic that I might be recalled to work as well, and be able to do my job while still keeping my family reasonably safe.

A possible complication is that the higher-paid employees (like me) may be brought back at 75% of their salaries at first, with plans to bring them back to full pay as sales recover. In general, I agree with that strategy — if someone needs to have their salary lowered to keep the company functioning, it shouldn't be the lower-paid employees; it should be someone like me. But if this happens, it could still cause us some difficulties. There are so many unknowns. All I can do is try to plot out various worst-case scenarios in my spreadsheets while at the same time trying to remain cautiously optimistic, and not getting caught up in too much anxiety over situations I can't control.

It helps to remind myself that we've been very, very fortunate so far. But then that just reminds me that so many others haven't been as fortunate.

It's time for me to finish this up and cook dinner.

Happy Mother's Day!

## About This Newsletter

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