

The Films of Fall

Paul R. Potts

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Hello friends and relations. It's been a while. It's a beautiful day. I'm up this morning drinking coffee one of my signature coffee drinks — half a tablespoon of instant espresso powder, a tablespoon of Guittard red cocoa powder, a little bit of coconut sugar, water, and oat milk, run through our little Breville Milk Café Electric Frother, model BMF600XL, which is still working and has proven to be a really great and reliable kitchen device that the kids can use, not just the adults.

This is a pretty common breakfast for us; Grace takes hers with no sugar at all. Weekday mornings I often make it with a full can of coconut milk and split it with Grace, but today it's me and oat milk. We're taste-testing a few different kinds of oat milk. We used to get oat milk lattes at Milan Coffee Works, sadly defunct. They used the Califia “Barista Edition” oat milk which is made with sunflower oil and steams up pretty nicely. Califia's other types of oat milk are made using rapeseed oil, which they are calling rapeseed oil again because public opinion has rightly turned against canola oil.

This is like calling orange roughly “slimehead” again to obscure its mercury content. Years ago I sometimes wound up in debates with friends over why we shouldn't be eating canola oil regularly, but the crux of it is that the fatty acid profile has too many sixes and not enough threes, which aggravates inflammatory processes in the body. The carbohydrate profile of oat milk, any variety, is the other reason I don't use it very often. Despite the long campaign against tropical oils, I believe that whole coconut milk is actually very healthy. In this house we no longer believe in the lipid hypothesis of heart disease, having seen its opposite play out in our own diets and health markers, but rather the industrial/processed food hypothesis of heart disease.

Some Good News

Assuming I pass the drug screen and background check, I will be starting a contract job on November 18th (yes, on a Friday, which is a bit unusual, but I guess the idea is they want to complete an online process to generate an employee badge for me, and complete other paperwork, before they start the full onboarding process the following Monday). I'm not going to say much about the

work except that it is a contract gig again, where I'll be working for a staffing firm, indirectly for Boeing. I am pleased to report that I was able to negotiate a rate that is pretty close to what I was earning when I was a contractor with Argo, so I won't have to take a big pay cut. The situation won't be great, though, since the staffing firm's health insurance offerings are not very good. This means that in the short term we'll still be paying COBRA, so health insurance will remain our biggest monthly expense. We'll try to figure out a better plan if we can. Keeping access to decent medical care is a never-ending challenge in our deeply broken employer-centric system here in America. I'm being generous by using the word "system." It's actually an extortion racket designed to keep workers from getting uppity and leaving abusive and exploitive employment situations, since your boss gets to decide, almost unilaterally, if your children can get medical care.

I'm also happy to report that after eight months of long COVID symptoms, my health seems to be improving a bit. I'm not back to 100%, but I am experiencing less fatigue and my sleep has improved somewhat. I still have tingling and burning in my feet and hands, tinnitus, headaches including some migraine-like noise sensitivity, problems with dry eyes and blurred vision, some cognitive impairment, and tachycardia. But these things seem to be improving. This week I drove our car for the first time in months and it went OK; Grace rode shotgun so she could take over in case I seemed to be having any obvious difficulties. But I still get fatigued very easily; Grace had to drive back.

The antihistamines didn't seem to help all that much long-term, but I'm convinced that two supplements in particular that I've recently started taking, nattokinase and serrapeptase, have helped greatly, along with a number of other supplements I've been taking for longer including vitamins C and D, zinc, low-dose aspirin, coenzyme Q10, a probiotic, and American ginseng. I'm planning to add *N*-acetylcysteine (NAC), which I've taken before for muscle aches; basically, we're looking for supplements that help lower inflammation and may help the body dissolve microclots, which are implicated in post-COVID symptoms.

Grace and I wouldn't have started nattokinase and serrapeptase without following the research among the long COVID community on Twitter. What will become of Twitter — whether the people who have found expertise and community there can continue to do so — remains to be seen, but I'm not optimistic.

Since I don't start the job until the 18th, I have a little down time that I can put into projects around the house. Of course, with seven kids to look after, I never get truly uninterrupted blocks of time. I'd like to work with Grace on some of these projects but when neither of us is looking after the kids, even if we carefully arrange for the older kids to take shifts watching the younger kids, things tend to go awry. But among the projects we're working on are: getting the basement utility room food storage shelving set up; getting the rest of our books out of storage and as many of them shelved as possible; getting rid of a drawing table that Veronica didn't wind up using; and getting rid of a spare bed upstairs. There's a lot more than that to do.

Ideally I'd be able to order more of the same white IKEA wooden bookcases that we've been using, but supply-chain problems continue to plague IKEA, and the HAVSTA bookcases we've been using have been unavailable for months. Even their most basic particle-board BILLY bookcases are out of stock. So the bookcases will have to wait, which is probably just as well, because I haven't gotten a paycheck since early July. Still, we will do as much as we can while I'm not working.

In the Dark

Yesterday shortly before sunset we had high winds in the area and our power went out. Grace and I were in the basement; I was in the windowless storage room/server room. In there it gets very dark when the power goes out. This isn't our first power outage by any means, so we were reasonably well prepared. The rule is not to run the water and not to open the refrigerator or freezers. Upstairs we could hear the kids telling each other not to open the refrigerator, so it looks like our training has taken hold.

We have a number of gallons of bottled water on hand, mainly to cook and flush toilets (our well pump won't run during an outage). We have six LED lanterns on a shelf in the basement as well as boxes of candles. And, I was reminded yet again that there are good reasons to keep a gas stove instead of replacing it with an electric induction range for environmental reasons. We can use a lighter to light the burners and boil water or cook food, while an electric stove would be useless.

Ideally we'd have a whole-house generator, but these things are extremely expensive and loud. So if I have money for infrastructure upgrades in the near future I'm planning to install whole-house battery backup in the utility room and rearrange the wiring so that in an outage, the freezers and refrigerator will stay up, along with a few lights, and we'll call that good enough.

Anyway, with our lanterns and gas stove we were able to cook dinner. It wasn't the stir-fry we planned, but pasta with a basic canned tomato sauce and prepackaged meatballs from GFS. Eaten by candlelight, it was almost romantic.

Backup Power

Downstairs in the storage room/server room, the room was lit only by the indicator lights on our rack of computer and networking gear. Fortunately we had fresh batteries in our LED lanterns. The UPS running "central-dogma" (our RAID file server), "balthasar" (a tiny headless PC that I use as a build server), the Ethernet switch, and the little satellite wifi* router, that keeps the downstairs network connected to the upstairs network, all stayed up and running flawlessly. I also have a reading light attached to the UPS so I was able to switch that on. This stuff will run for maybe three hours on the UPS, according to the UPS display's run-time estimate. The server, "central-dogma," is connected to the UPS with a USB cable and should shut *itself* down when the battery power

gets critical; it started sending me e-mail messages in case I didn't know that the power was getting low. But I don't want to rely on that behavior, so I shut it down manually. I've never actually let it run until the battery is dead to see if that is accurate, since this isn't good for UPS batteries or the devices. My old Mac Pro and monitors, on the other hand, on a different UPS, won't make it more than five or ten minutes.

*I've changed my personal style guide to use "wīfī," with macrons indicating pronunciation, specified in Markdown as "wīfī," rather than "Wi-Fi," for the same reason I write "e-mail" instead of "electronic mail" now, although I refuse to write "email" because it suggests a mispronunciation. I also still like (and use) the New Yorker's obscure house spelling of "cooperate" as "coöperate," with a diaeresis, so deal with it!

There are two other small UPSes upstairs. One of them is in our bedroom and it keeps the cable modem and main wīfī router going. I used a small one so it would fit in a bookcase (high up, away from the young kids who like to yank on cables). We have not had an outage to test that UPS device's runtime since I set it up. It turns out that is the weak link in the chain; it didn't last more than thirty or forty minutes, and then our Internet was out. So, I need to consider replacing that UPS with a beefier one, although the type I've used successfully downstairs is too large and deep to fit on the bookcase, so I'll have to find a different model. The remaining small UPS was connected to "casper," another mini-PC in my upstairs office. Casper uses a very small amount of current with the screen off, and even after a couple of hours was still up and running just fine, although the UPS was beeping to warn us that the power was out. I was able to turn on the screen and shut it down safely so it didn't have its power yanked unceremoniously, which I always try to avoid. That's plenty of runtime, so I don't feel a need to replace *that* UPS. In a typical workday, if the power goes out for a few minutes, even during a Zoom meeting, I don't lose connectivity at all.

This unplanned test of our infrastructure suggests that we should make a few upgrades in the near future. For example, I want to get some better-quality LED lanterns that use rechargeable batteries and will run much longer than the cheap D battery-powered lanterns from Costco that we have now.

Saturdays nights are our family movie nights, so we were planning to watch a movie together. The power outage didn't really change those plans; our weekly rituals are important to us, so we still wanted to watch a movie if at all possible. It wasn't possible to play a Blu-ray or DVD, so I was hoping to stream something from Paramount Plus or the Criterion Channel on a laptop. When our cable modem went down, I tried setting up my phone as a hotspot and streaming to a laptop that way. This seemed to work acceptably well with old films from the Criterion Channel, which seems to be pretty well optimized for lower bandwidth, but Paramount Plus was completely unusable. So that's something to keep in mind in the future. Joshua and I were wondering if it would be possible to have the whole family watch a Criterion film directly on my phone's screen, but fortunately it did not come to that, and the power came back on.

Just for future reference, there's another option; if we lose our cable modem, but the wifi remains up, or I eventually get wired networking set up between the basement server room and other floors, and that stays up, we should be able to stream video from our own server. That includes backups of a few DVDs that we own, including some children's DVDs like *Here Come the ABCs* by They Might Be Giants. That wouldn't be the first choice of the older kids but streaming that on a laptop would keep the younger ones occupied for a while.

Since the power came back on shortly after dinner, it didn't come to that, and we wound up watching a streaming movie. It's often not easy to find a movie that will satisfy everyone, and sometimes we have to satisfy no one. That was the case last night as we watched *The Addams Family*, the 2019 animated film. So here's a quick review, and then I'll review some of the other movies we've watched recently.

The Films of Fall

***The Addams Family* (2019 Animated Film)**

I did not have high hopes for this film but I was still disappointed. The animation style in the introduction makes heavy reference to a much better film, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The film is riddled with gags that refer to other, better movies, including *The Amityville Horror*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Trainspotting*, *Frankenstein*, the Harry Potter films, and others too numerous to mention. And it heavily references the live-action *The Addams Family* (the 1991 film).

There's a general principle that a mediocre movie *probably* shouldn't spend a lot of time reminding the viewer of other, much better, movies. This movie does this constantly. It shows every sign of having been written, or re-written, by a team of screenwriters, who did a lot of "punch-up," larding it with jokes. There is a plot, but it's a fairly weak one, and the movie spends far more time just making jokes rather than advancing the plot or developing the characters. I enjoyed the drawing style and character design, and some of the jokes are quite funny, but overall it just fails to maintain a tone or mood or even a color palette. So, I can't really recommend it, although younger kids might find it fun.

***The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993 Animated Film)**

I saw this film in the theater back when it came out; my friend Art's sister Ruth was married on Halloween 1993, and invited friends and relations to go see this film together. Since then I've seen it quite a few times. It's become a Potts House tradition to watch it on or near Halloween. This year we had a Blu-ray with a "sing-along" feature that puts the lyrics on the screen during each song, and the older kids knew the melodies well enough to sing along in chorus. And I was reminded again of just what a wonderful film this is.

It was made using traditional stop-motion animation, entirely or at least mostly

without the use of any computer animation. According to Wikipedia, the director Henry Selick

...and his team of animators began production in July 1991 in San Francisco, California with a crew of over 120 workers, utilizing 20 sound stages for filming... at the peak of production, 20 individual stages were simultaneously being used for filming. In total, there were 109,440 frames taken for the film.

This movie is a classic, and one of the reasons is because the music is so smooth and vibrant. Listening critically this time, I was especially impressed with the way that the phrasing in the songs is constantly flowing across bars in a jazzy way, and how Elfman used complex syncopation and tempo changes to keep the ear slightly off-balance; in other words, the music helps induce a spooky, haunted feeling. For the eyes, it is also a creepy feast, with countless clever and intriguing details in the handmade puppets and sets.

How do the story and characters hold up decades later? For the most part, extremely well. Jack remains a flawed and impulsive character who suffers for his hubris. Sally is portrayed brilliantly as a broken and torn character who is used to picking herself back up and literally pulling herself back together, and who has learned to use her brokenness to her advantage. The Mayor of Halloween Town remains my favorite minor character, a high-strung character with a head that spins around to instantly switch between a happy face and a fearful face, and who complains to Jack that he can't actually do anything because he's "only an elected official." But even the minor characters and puppet "extras" in this film all look wildly creative and intriguing to the eye.

Oogie Boogie, in 2022, troubles me a little bit, because of the way he's portrayed as black, singing New Orleans-style blues, and his character is a lecherous gambler. This seems to invoke some very negative stereotypes. I think that maybe the filmmakers were channeling Cab Calloway in the old Betty Boop cartoons such as this one. The film's screenwriter, Caroline Thompson, has pointed out that Oogie Boogie's outfit resembles a Klan robe, and now I can't unsee that. Is this a racist portrayal? Yes, I think it is. Will that make me stop enjoying this movie? I don't think that's possible; it just contains so much great visual storytelling, and so many great songs. When showing things like this to my kids I prefer to "teach the controversy," ask them to weigh in, and talk about the history of such portrayals, rather than just censor them.

***Ghostbusters* (1984 Film)**

Speaking of troubling portrayals, we also recently watched the original *Ghostbusters*. Like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* it's been part of our seasonal scary film repertoire; it's a "scary" film that doesn't risk giving any of the younger kids nightmares.

This is such a fun movie, and a great story. I also saw this one back in the day

when it was new, and I remember laughing myself silly because the big reveal of the form taken by Gozer the Destroyer, the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man, came as such a hilarious surprise. There are also many, many great, completely deadpan line deliveries, not just by Bill Murray, but by all the cast members.

However, in 2022, I'm uncomfortably reminded of the fact that Dr. Peter Venkman, played by Murray, is in fact a fraud as an academic, and uses his position to hit on female students. He also pursues Dana Barrett, played by Sigorney Weaver, in ways that are cringe-worthy. What makes this difficult to watch now is that he really doesn't face any consequences for his poor judgment. He becomes a celebrity, saves the city, and gets the girl. So when we watch this one, there are things to discuss with the kids about appropriate and inappropriate behavior and why Dr. Venkman is not actually a very good role model.

***Near Dark* (1987 Film)**

Trying to make the most out of our Criterion Channel subscription, Grace and I watched *Near Dark* (without the kids). This is regarded as a cult film. It was Kathryn Bigelow's first big film as a director. She would go on to direct *Point Break*, which I've still never seen, and *Strange Days*, one of the first films I ever wrote a review of, as well as some bigger films I haven't seen, and probably never will, including *The Hurt Locker* and the war-glamorizing *Zero Dark Thirty*.

This is a cult film, and not widely known, but in my view it is a near-masterpiece blend of both the horror and western genres. Wikipedia calls it a "neo-Western," and I think that's accurate. It works so well because, as the kids say, it goes *hard*, and as I say, it goes so far over the top that it can barely see the top anymore.

Near Dark is the story of a young guy named Caleb who lives in a Western town. He meets a beautiful young woman named Mae. He discovers the hard way that Mae is a vampire. Not only that, but she bites him and immediately turns *him* into a vampire. Caleb apparently hasn't done the reading, and doesn't know what to do next. To survive, he is forced to join Mae's band of roaming vampires who sleep by day in a darkened camper and feed by night.

The special effects in the film are entirely practical, and aside from an occasional mannequin that looks a little unconvincing, they are fantastic. The word "gritty" is over-used, but this film is gritty. Everyone looks sweaty and filthy and, sometimes, actually on fire, due to the amazing work of stunt performers. The cinematography, in which many scenes are shot in low-light conditions and so look very grainy, is gorgeous, especially in scenes shot outdoors at sunset or sunrise.

Several of the vampires in Mae's posse are quite amazing. Bill Paxton plays the psychopathic vampire Severan, giving a wonderfully crazed performance. Lance Henriksen plays Jesse, a vampire who dates back to the Civil War, and Joshua John Miller plays a child vampire named Homer. These side characters are much more compelling than Adrian Pasdar as Caleb, although Pasdar does a decent

job. This is a *very* dark story, but the film is tightly edited and manages a nice series of escalations and comes to a satisfying, suitably over-the-top conclusion. I would recommend it to any fans of eighties horror films.

***Vampire's Kiss* (1989 Film)**

Vampire's Kiss stars Nicholas Cage, and he clearly is working very hard to create his character, a literary agent named Peter Loew who falls in love with a vampire. But while I admire Cage in many films, his characterization here just does not work for me. For one thing, his nonsensical British accent seems to be all over the map, shifting crazily from scene to scene, possibly due to out-of-order shooting of scenes. I had never heard of this film, but there is a lot written about it; here's an article by Zach Schonfeld. Schonfeld explains that the screenplay was written by Joseph Minion, who wrote a much more successful unhinged dark comedy that I *do* recommend, called *After Hours*. Schonfeld writes:

When Peter gets bitten by a vampiric lover named Rachel, he believes he's turning into a vampire and descends into insanity, ranting and raving and begging for death. The film regards Peter's spiraling madness with unflinching fascination, as he kills a woman in a nightclub and hallucinates in the streets.

The *structure* of Cage's descent, and of the film, is fascinating, but while it shocks the viewer occasionally, in both good and ways, I wouldn't call it a good movie, but a failed experiment. I didn't really need to see Nicholas Cage actually eat a live cockroach, for example. But most of all, I didn't need to see Cage's character bullying, and eventually raping, Alva, a secretary, played by Maria Conchita Alonso, whose acting choices in this film are far more sensible and convincing. Critics have debated Cage's choices in this film, arguing that he was channelling over-the-top performances found in old silent films such as *Nosferatu*. I don't find those arguments compelling. We never had to hear Nosferatu screaming "I'm a vampire!".

So, I can't really recommend this one. The best things that I can say about it are these: it *is* creative, it *is* darkly satirical, and it is *not* mediocre. If you can tolerate the craziness, you might find its crazy awfulness to be entertaining.

***The Ghost and the Darkness* (1996 Film)**

Finally, we watched *The Ghost in the Darkness*. I had ordered a used Blu-ray months earlier, because Grace remembered seeing it in the theater in her younger days and recalled that she had found it quite scary. We hadn't watched it, though. I had kind of forgotten about it, until I was recently rearranging part of our movie collection downstairs. It seemed to be an appropriate time to watch it. I reviewed this one on Twitter, so I'll just quote my tweets and edit them a bit. You can find my original thread here; it includes some photographs.

We watched *The Ghost and the Darkness*, the 1996 film. It's a great

true-ish story, shot in beautiful places but just a bit too cheesy to be really engaging. Val Kilmer's accent comes and goes. I just have a sense that he put in a heroic effort but was not quite right for the part.

I think someone like Sam Neill would have been better. Michael Douglas plays an invented character with an thin back-story, and he chews the savannah. The lions are pretty cool but on Blu-ray their lack of realism is clear. Probably, they looked better in the theater.

The film was recognized for sound design and that seems fair; the sound design is excellent.

Overall the movie is not great but it has its moments. The supporting cast is very good. The cinematography is pretty good. There are some genuinely exciting scenes and gruesome moments but many of them are unfortunately pushed too far and go from scary to laughable.

The tame zoo lions just look too placid to really be the lightning-fast killers they are supposed to be. The real lions were an unusual pair of male lions without manes, and I don't think their uncharacteristic human-hunting behavior has been fully understood.

I can't highly recommend this film because Val Kilmer isn't quite right for the role, and because Michael Douglas's over-the-top performance winds up taking the viewer out of the story. I could forgive the somewhat lame lion effects, but since Douglas with his over-acting is telegraphing "cheesy movie" so hard, directly into the viewer's hindbrain, the viewer starts to look for other flaws, and there are plenty to find. Apparently Douglas came on as a producer, insisted on expanding his character's role, and then gave himself credit as the lead actor in the film, although he's not the protagonist and does not have as much screen time as Val Kilmer.

This article about the film points out that the film rips off *Jaws*, a much better scary-animal film:

Plenty of movies have imitated *Jaws* over the years, usually copying the animal attacks and leaving out the memorable character dynamics.

But then the article continues:

The Ghost and the Darkness is one of the very few movies that gets the alchemy right.

And I must strongly disagree. There's no "alchemy." The character dynamics aren't "memorable." The film *does* have a few genuinely scary moments, and the lions are scariest when we don't see them too clearly, but then we do get

to see them clearly, and they aren't scary. There are more scary moments later because we can *hear* the lions and not see them, and this is where the sound design shines, but that can't turn it into a good movie.

Roger Ebert summed it up in his review:

The Ghost and the Darkness is an African adventure that makes the Tarzan movies look subtle and realistic.

It's too bad, because the actual story of the two lions, called The Ghost and The Darkness, who killed a shocking number of people. Claims at the time was that they had killed over a hundred people, but modern estimates place the number closer to 35. It's still a stunning number. And the real-life Colonel Patterson, who killed both lions at grave risk to himself, no doubt really *was* a bad-ass. I'd love to see a good movie about this fascinating true story, but unfortunately this isn't it. What a waste.

Profiles in Potts Kid: Elanor and Malachi

I've been promising that I would write more about the kids, so in today's newsletter I will introduce, or re-introduce, Elanor (five years old) and Malachi (three years old). I've asked Grace to assist me in writing this part.

Elanor Susan Potts

Many of you know that Elanor was born with Down Syndrome and that she had open-heart surgery very early to repair a common heart defect associated with Down Syndrome. If you aren't familiar with that story, you can read it on our family web site here.

Since then Elanor has grown and grown and she is now a remarkably healthy, robust, active little girl with crazily frizzy hair that she refuses to let us cut; it's all we can do to wash it up a bit and trim the ends now and then.

You can find some recent pictures of Elanor on Twitter using this search. I'm not planning to delete my Twitter account anytime soon, but I can't guarantee I won't be thrown off or suspended at some point, and I think there's also a good chance that Twitter may either go under or change its business model, so view them there while you can.

Raising Elanor is quite a project. She's very extraverted and loud, which is a challenge to me personally as I get overwhelmed with the noise and chaos she brings to our home. She also loves messy play, and is very strong-willed; she often will hear us tell her *not* to do something, and clearly understand us, but choose to ignore us. This combination means that whenever she gets a chance, and it only takes a moment of lax supervision, she'll get into things: mud, or fireplace ash, or flour, or sugar, or beet powder, or honey, or rice, or oat milk, or peanut butter. In particular she seems to love the tactile qualities of things, and rubs them all over herself.

Elanor chooses her own outfits; she definitely has the strongest sense of unique personal style of any of the Potts kids, often assembling combinations that look like she's cosplaying a "manic pixie dream girl" character in a nineties film; for example, a pink tutu combined with striped leggings and a rainbow sweater. Or, sometimes, pants on her head, or shirts as pants, but in her case it looks intentional. And why not? I'm recalling the trend of models wearing men's underwear as brassieres.

Elanor doesn't speak much yet, or at least, she doesn't say very many things that we can understand. I have heard her say "mom" or "dad" or "mine" or "thank you." Grace can sometimes understand her when I can't. Grace reports that she has lots of complaints about her little brother, and says things like "Mikey took it," or "go get Mikey" (by which she means Malachi). In a recent fight with Veronica over her evening tooth-brushing, Elanor told her clearly "I am not a baby!" But sometimes she yells things that none of us can fully make sense of. At meals, she often seems to either be criticizing the food, sometimes by pointing at it and yelling, or demanding something else to eat, but often we can't figure out just *what* she is yelling about. As she also yells and sings to herself while she plays, though in a happier tone of voice, she is by far our noisiest child, which is especially challenging for me with my post-COVID tinnitus and noise sensitivity.

When people don't respond to her, she tends to escalate, and will resort to throwing things, like glasses of milk or plates of food, so we do our best not to let things get to that point. As we've all gotten better at communicating with each other, that kind of acting out has diminished.

For a time we were taking Elanor to speech therapy, and that seemed promising, but we think it was most likely at the speech therapy clinic where she was initially infected with COVID-19 in 2020, so we have not gone back due to the risk of reinfection. There isn't a lot of good data about the risk that children with Down Syndrome face with COVID-19. There were studies in 2020 suggesting that her risk of death due to infection was ten times higher than that of her peers. As a cardiac patient who had pulmonary hypertension post-surgery, she has an additional risk factor, although her circulation seems quite good now (her skin is not mottled in appearance the way it was pre-surgery, unless she gets cold), and her daily activities are in no way restricted for reasons of heart health.

We've tried to teach her some sign language, and she knows some signs, but she seems to dislike using them. She seems to prefer using speech like the rest of us do, which should probably not be surprising; we're not deaf parents. It's our understanding that Elanor's difficulties with speech are more due to low muscle tone or other forms of dyspraxia — she finds it difficult to make her mouth form clear vowels and consonants. It's pretty clear to us that she understands just about everything we say, even when it doesn't seem like she is actively listening. Here's an example: Grace and I were reminiscing about a big mess she made in the kitchen, in which she coated the counters, and herself, with bright red beet powder. Five minutes later, Elanor re-created the scene in the kitchen, giggling to herself.

So, Elanor is something of a paradox: clearly very bright, despite her intellectual disability, and she loves to interact with us, but is at the same time the hardest Potts child to communicate with verbally. She largely gets her points across in other ways.

She's also the most *physical*, in the sense that she seems to enjoy rough play and wrestling the most. She loves to engage in what we call "butt-slamming." She leaps into the air, folds her legs up in mid-air, and comes down on her butt. She does this so hard and so often that she's broken several pieces of furniture this way including a couch, and several bed frames. (And here we thought Benjamin and Joshua were "handfuls," physically.)

We really need the pandemic to end — not "end" as people simply declare it over while sickness is still spreading through the population, but to actually end because transmission is no longer common — so that we can get her into speech therapy, and possibly a pre-school setting. But with public health in terminal decline in America, it doesn't seem like that situation will exist anytime soon. So we do what we can. Elanor will have a followup appointment with her cardiologist next August. They don't feel the need to see her very often any more, not even annually, which shows that they are confident her heart surgery was a complete success. We want to do our best to keep her body free of any further damage from COVID-19.

Malachi Richard Potts

Malachi was our "bonus baby," the only one of the Potts kids who was a complete surprise. Grace was seeing her doctor for symptoms of menopause, and was surprised to find that she was actually pregnant. He certainly was a pleasant surprise, although Grace had a difficult time with this pregnancy, but he has been completely healthy, with no issues at all, other than an allergy to eggs, which he seems to have outgrown.

You can find some pictures of Malachi on Twitter using this search.

Malachi began speaking quite early and now speaks well, often using a surprisingly large vocabulary and complex sentences. He loves to watch SpongeBob SquarePants, although he refers to the show as "SpongeBob Pants," demonstrating that he can handle three-syllable phrases, but not four. He's also been playing video games with some proficiency since he was two, and it's common for us to find him hidden in a corner playing Smash Brothers or some similar game on a hand-held Nintendo. (I probably shouldn't be telling you this since little kids aren't supposed to get "screen time," but given the fact that his siblings spend so much time playing these games, it was probably inevitable that Malachi would demand his turn.)

Malachi is also loud, and has a particularly piercing scream. He also dislikes having his hair washed, but sometimes we just can't let it go any longer. He will tolerate us trimming it with scissors, but won't let me bring the clippers

anywhere near him. The last time I washed his hair, he yelled so much that my ears were ringing afterwards. I should have worn my earmuffs (I often wear those when I'm trying to concentrate on work and the kids are too loud, or when my tinnitus gets particularly bad, or I'm having a migraine-like attack of excess noise sensitivity; sometimes I have to wear them to dinner with my family.)

Malachi shows some typical autism behavior. He loves to play with spoons, and will often walk around the house vigorously waving spoons in each hand as if he was using them for swordplay, or perhaps as a musical instrument. This also means we keep finding our spoons left everywhere in both the house and the yard. Grace and I keep our bedroom and bathroom doors locked at all times, so that the kids won't start playing with toilet paper, toothpaste, soap, or shampoo, or make wet messes, and so they won't destroy the books or electronics we keep in the bedroom. Malachi has recently learned to use spoons as lockpicks, though.

He runs hot, refuses to wear clothes even when it is quite cool in the house, and refuses to have covers over him while sleeping. Feeling his hands and feet indicates that he's perfectly warm, though, so we try not to worry about it.

Malachi, like Joshua and Benjamin, is particularly attached to his mom. Often I will offer him comfort or cuddling and he will refuse it, demanding mom and mom alone. Elanor will sometimes accept cuddles from Daddy, though, if mom is unavailable.

I'm going to wind it up there for today. Have a great week!

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