

Miasma, Ennui, and Hope

(food, drink, and music included)

South Park, Colorado, August 23, 2020

It's the fag end of a summer that needs finishing lest we all go mad. The West is on fire, hundreds, maybe thousands of fires burning from just past Vail all the way across Utah and Nevada to California, down in New Mexico and Arizona and up north, too. Across maybe a million square miles, give or take the area of an eastern state, the smoke and dust commingle in the dry air and merciless sunlight, producing a haze that does not usually smell like smoke. Driving across South Park last week before sunset, the rangeland seemed immersed in clover honey, the cattle languid in a thin golden liquid, a light I didn't think I could capture, and the big dogs and I needed watering, so we pressed on. Now back in the high country, on cloudless days, and they are almost all cloudless, I can barely make out the shape of the peaks that surround me. One of the reasons to be here in the summer is to see the mountains, with their patches of snow glistening in the sun, against the blue sky, especially in the morning before the afternoon storms bring lightning, hail, and blessed rain. Nothing glistens now, and storms are rare. We have had no water, little serious precipitation for many months. February had heavy snow, but the snow from March into May simply failed, though there was a bad late storm in June, killing much. The hummingbirds survived, I know not how. But these days, the sky is blue at the azimuth, mostly, and the horizon is white. I've never seen this much dust on the aspens and the grass thereunder, through which a dimly glowing coyote sauntered yesterday morning. My eyes burn, just a little, but constantly. Waiting.

The air is officially "unhealthy" most days, sometimes softened to "unhealthy for sensitive groups," more bad news on the phone, an excuse not to train. It's not really news, actually, pseudo facts triangulated from readily available data according to some algorithm. Nobody measures anything out here, so we have to be satisfied with digital rumors, in this case true, say my eyes.

For centuries, the air of cities was thought to be unhealthy, especially in summer, and people fled to their villas in the countryside, but this subalpine forest provides no real escape from the miasma. At least it is not too hot. Denver off to the east and a mile lower is even more unhealthy right now, the ozone rich smog settling into the hollow in which the city rests, bad air trapped up against the Front Range, and high temperatures near 100 degrees Fahrenheit. One inescapably thinks of global warming, the drought that seems to have been building for a few decades now, the dissolution of the Anasazi, and perhaps it could happen again. We are far removed from our food sources, supply chains are fragile, as COVID-19 has taught us.

The pandemic continues, more bad air with no end planned, or not believably so. Times do pass, so presumably these strange days too will pass, having changed things somehow, no doubt about that, but not much knowledge, either. I worry that the police powers of the state and especially employers will be extended, with people required to monitor themselves, even while loudly demanding "justice," a word again used as a blade, as it has been since Robespierre at least. The

result, one must worry on the basis of much history, is likely to be the spiritual and even material immiseration of the lower and middle classes, wrapped in piety. For the relatively privileged in the academy and elsewhere, life is likely to become more irksome, as Auden had it. New Soviet Man must lie a lot, and dreams of escape while managing the proles. Given my German heritage, state power and the temptation of intellectuals to be silent is a personal concern, but while I feel some obligation to respond, I'm not sure how, and not sure I have the energy. All it takes is for good men to be silent, I grew up with, but I'm not sure I'm willing to make the enemies, and bear the cost of doing so. I am getting old, soft. Not long ago, it was easy to ridicule those in Texas and such places who were unwilling to take common sense measures to flatten the curve, and it still is, but as the pandemic grinds on and surveillance becomes further normalized, and our own phones are used to consolidate institutional power, as the divides deepen, I wonder about the point at which each of us reaches our own Texas, the point of defiance, maybe even explosion. Sliding . . . I fear my own Texas may be close, notwithstanding the fact that I also worry about my moral cowardice, that I'll just watch the body politic rot, the fish begin to stink. No man with a family (or who needs health care and retirement funding) is free, but that is just the sort of thing a coward would say, even as his own situation deteriorated around him.

This is all too overheated, surely must be. Much of my anxiety and occasional flashes of rage are also due to the pandemic, which has infected politics and minds, too. Yet every day I learn more about East Germany, and I have come to understand much more deeply how McCarthy happened. The conditions of our political life, like our supply chains, are more fragile than we have long unconsciously presumed. Today, by way of example, we wonder how the postal service, to say nothing of more modern forms of communication, will function in the upcoming election. We talk incessantly about "conversations" that we have no intention of holding. Show trials, maybe. What will be said, in a "society" so fractured as to make any outcome suspicious to many? Something, one must hope, something good. Please, but that is not an argument, more a prayer for relief.

There is more bad news in our pockets, the news is almost always bad, that is the business model, and therefore we wallow in a digital ocean of sadness, injustice, stridency of one sort or another. We now spend so much time thinking "bad thoughts," as our very young son would choke out upon waking from a nightmare, shaken, as were his parents. Still am, come to rethink that suppressed thought – there is little more heartrending than the nightmare of a small child. For all our comforts, our unhappiness is almost boundless, global, which is of course progress, innovation as my university robotically intones, never having seriously thought about technology but hoping for grant money or licensing fees. And though the comforts are in question, the incessant awareness of marketable unhappiness that informs the contemporary consciousness is not. Miasma has moved from weather to a psychological condition of digital modernity, a life lived in bad thoughts. Breathe deep, it will go easier.

Sitting on a deck with friends, socially distant enough in the hazy sunlight, yet again discussing how much we do not know. When to travel? She's Spanish, and everybody has family elsewhere. I do too, and how long can you go without visiting your old people, before it is too late? Will the plans for reopening schools hold? Each member of my family goes back to school now, in various states, as students or teachers, under different plans, different chances of success

– and with different levels of risk in the environment and to their persons. When will I teach next, under what circumstances? It has become difficult to talk about anything else, even though nobody knows anything, which everyone realizes but says yet again. Making small talk, trying to be polite, my own words bore me so much that I want to scream, but that would be rude and would take so much energy.

A small wildfire, if that phrase makes any sense, pops up a few miles away, this side of the range – friends of my friends live there – and provides a break from the ennui. They send a picture of the smoke and a rant about careless neighbors with a campfire. I picture old folks foolishly trying to have fun with the grandkids. Whatever. Several houses are evacuated in an abundance of caution, and the fire is quickly contained. The air is so bad that we never saw that smoke here. We are living in smoke. Still, if the forest over there could burn, perhaps it could here as well. In a normal year, we are too high and green for fire to be much of a concern. But maybe not this year. Worrisome.

Work is getting done, the demiurge is a relentless bitch, but small tasks are daunting. Should those odd boards left over from building the stairs be cut for kindling, or stored somewhere as a home for rodents in the off chance I'll find a use for them sooner rather than later? If I want to cut them I ought to get a sharp chain on the saw, as I've meant to do for months now, and I need much more wood for winter if it ever comes, but chainsaws are really fiddly for all but the skillful. Perhaps it would be enough to do some laundry? Real tasks like fixing an expensive and suddenly recalcitrant router, or engaging credit agencies to cope with yet another data breach, stretch out like the Sahara or the North Atlantic, implacable, trackless, hopeless. Maybe try tomorrow. So tired, but "tired" is not the right word.

The big dogs and I haven't eaten today, and should. A week ago I spatchcocked a chicken and grilled it, with a bunch of Indian spices. It's not great, too heavy on the turmeric for starters, but the bird died and I have to own that, so have been eating off it for a while. Yesterday I managed to debone what was left, and throw the bones and some old sourdough in a pot of water, broth for the dogs if nothing else. It takes me almost an hour to get an idea and summon the will to start. Something summery, easy, satisfying. Kind of Russian/Mexican/Indian.

Chop some potatoes and onions and get them going in a deep saucepan. Toss in a couple of ladles of that broth.

Red cabbage and zucchini, no oil, a light char in a cast iron skillet.

Pacing, I see a dark red ball sliding behind the range, and I head outside to try to photograph sunset in a time of fires. The shot from the deck is off, so I hustle to a clearing owned by my nearest neighbor. That picture isn't great, either, but the sun is almost gone now, and I hurry to get back before things go from char to burn, dogs scrambling through the tall grass.

Chicken salad. Chop small: chicken, celery, good pickles and some of the juice, green onion, and *a lot* of fresh cilantro. Add decent mayonnaise, squeeze of lemon, and blend. I was going to spice, but there's enough spice here already. (Always, taste. Hard to remember when you pretty much know what you're doing.) Chicken is finally good. Really good.

A few drops of water and a lid for the cabbage and zucchini to make sure cooked but not overcooked, want a little crunch, and then into a glass bowl. Quick quasi-pickle with champagne vinegar, dill, and kosher salt, setting off the char. Success. (Do NOT pickle in your skillet and ruin the seasoning of your cast iron.)

Potatoes and onions are done. Toss with salsa, cover with inexpensive mixed cheese, transfer to some sort of heat proof pan and into toaster oven until the cheese is bubbly.

A civilized man would have a rose or maybe a very light red wine with this, Garnacha perhaps. I have neither, so I decide to postpone dinner while the potatoes finish, and make a dark & stormy, the English rose. I think about Bermuda, wedding and writing, and a sort of shabby end of empire feel, not just the British Empire but the longest runway except JFK, at least that's what the locals say as a point of pride, built by the Americans to win wars and to project force thereafter. From over 10,000 feet in the heart of the continent during a pandemic, Bermuda is so far away, out there in the Sargasso Sea, current-wrapped in the middle of the Atlantic. I think jumbled thoughts of flowers, wife and children and extended family, swimming with colorful fish, *The Tempest*, wahoo at a bar own by Germans, and hope.

Dark & stormy is among the simplest of drinks, which means there are many arguments over how it should be made. Here's what I do, which is wrong, as often. English straight sided pint glass. A fair amount of ice. Fill halfway up, sometimes more, sometimes less, depends on the evening and who is drinking, with dark rum. Top with ginger beer. The glass is narrower at the bottom, and more of the ice is there, and you don't fill all the way to the top, so I figure it is about 3 parts to 5, spirit to mixer, give or take. One might, of course, measure, but that would reduce the drama. Anyway, a big stiff drink, suitable for contemplating chaos at sundown, and isn't that – along with really great food – the heart of drinking? I garnish with a squeeze of lemon and the peel. Not proper, but tasty.

Why is it called “dark and stormy,” you ask? Traditionally, one uses a smaller glass, and just one or two cubes of ice. Pour in ginger beer. Float the rum on top, maybe using the back of a spoon. Spirits are generally lighter than mixers, so the drink has a “dark” layer topside, the rum, and a “stormy” layer on bottom, the ginger beer with its bubbles. Pretty! Drinking it that way, the first sips are really strong, nearly pure rum with some ginger coming through, but the drink weakens as you work your way down, which is not always a bad idea. You have a little time, drinking a soft drink towards the end, to feel the rum hit before you decide to order another. Govern yourself accordingly. But lots of people mix the drink after the first few sips, and they are on their own. Having seen the namesake layers before, and I've been on my own in the wasteland for far too long, I put the rum in first to make a more consistent drink – the rum floats through the ginger, mixing it, so each sip tastes of both rum and ginger.

I wonder if the inventor of the drink, a genius long ago lost in barrooms, or maybe on decks, wanted to make a “stormy” drink because of *The Tempest*? Bermuda was first settled by shipwreck, and brilliant seamanship. In many places the reef is so far from shore that there is little sign of danger until it is too late. The island was isolated, hundreds of miles from land, and nobody reached it until the Europeans, with their fancy ships, until the beginning of the modern

era. The Europeans didn't conquer it, like the rest of what is now called the Americas, for the simple reason that there were no natives to be conquered. For a long moment, Bermuda represented the rediscovery of the garden, and that may be what captivated Shakespeare. It is thought that the "discovery" of Bermuda was Shakespeare's inspiration for *The Tempest*, an island of beautiful water, caves, and magic, nowhere, uninhabited except by fairies, and so fundamental. But that was a moment. Africans were brought in shortly thereafter, as slaves, to make and then operate a sugar economy that kinda sorta worked, hence rum, but the cane just did better further south. The island remains largely black, except the money managers, the Russian oligarchs, the ocean sailing crowd, billfishing boats with stunning sweeping gunnels, strong enough to run across the open ocean from Annapolis, Charleston or even Miami and fast enough to run drugs . . . why did I waste my life on a bankrupt academy?

In a simple drink, ingredients are especially key. First, traditionally, the rum should be Goslings Black Seal, made in Bermuda since 1808, funky and dark. On my return to the high country, I discovered that a friend had left a bottle on my counter. It is good to have friends, lots of folks with keys to this house, one of the many good things that are not news. I think other dark rums would work, but I've not been forced to test the proposition. Sometimes one should respect tradition.

Second, ginger beer, not ginger ale, which is too sweet. There can be no compromise on this point. To be really proper, Barritts, from Bermuda since 1878, though Goslings also makes a fine ginger beer. I'm flexible, however, with regard to brand. Ginger beer seems to be well made pretty much wherever Her Majesty has exercised dominion, and I've had good stuff from South Africa, Jamaica, and the United States, as well Bermuda, which remains a British territory. Tonight, I'm using an Australian ginger beer that is available in "town," rather an honorific.

Finally, the garnish. Purists insist that there should be no garnish. Many people garnish with lime, and lime is very good. I found out today, however, that lemon is very good, too, which is unsurprising when you think about it – both rum and ginger are often paired with lemon, especially in cakes. Goslings is excellent for baking.

Dinner is also excellent, nibbled standing while listening to music and thinking, writing this and other things. The eyes still hurt and there is no firm promise of rain in the forecast, just occasional thunderstorms as likely to be dry and start fires as to prevent or put them out with real rain. Nonetheless, I do have hopes, albeit lately mostly as a matter of theological/familial commitment, existential pride rather than spontaneous mood, the grace of strength which is no easy grace. And tonight, however, things look a little better. Not incidentally after a decent meal and some good drinks, the miasma seems more manageable. We can cope until summer ends, and it will end, and the rains – this high, snow – will come. The nation will heal itself, for the most part. The wounds are many but not as deep as they often look on our screens. We will find ways to make our servitude, digital and otherwise, bearable. There will be things to love.

A chance find strikes me as a good omen. It's a fine night to discover "Bad Trick," just out from Ray Wiley Hubbard and friends. Now in his late 70s, Ray is a legend of Texas music – that narrative guitar driven fusion of blues, rock and country that goes by many names – who never hit the big time, spent his life singing in the kind of bars and small venues where I spent much of

my dissolute youth. This, despite being an original who wrote classics like “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother” and “Screw You, We’re From Texas,” and other more obviously serious songs.

One night, Ray came back unhappy from a substandard performance, and his wife Judy reminded him that “Everybody turns a bad trick now and then.” That line became the kernel of the first song they ever wrote together, a back and forth of little home truths, at least home in Texas, destined to be rowdily sung along in bars and honky-tonks, if we get to go back to such places, God willing. Chris Robinson, Ringo Starr, Joe Walsh and Don Was wanted to play along, but the pandemic had just started, and so the song is performed together by people in the same room and others thousands of miles apart. This digitization thing ain’t all bad, and neither is a year in which we are forced to slow down and think about what matters. Pandemics, like wars, provide opportunities for real virtue. A climbing buddy told me that the Aztecs believed that hummingbirds were symbols of bravery - the spirits of fallen warriors, and the hummingbirds here are indomitable, spinning and whirling and hovering in the foul air. Courage.

And for you, friends and colleagues, as we together head into yet another difficult season, fires still burning in many senses, we might remember to forgive ourselves and others even more when the best that can be managed isn’t all that great, isn’t even good. [Everybody turns a bad trick now and then](#). Indeed. Keep going, so that sometimes, it can be great. Will be.

That’s all I can do today, demiurge. Bitch.

END