

A COVID-19 JOURNAL: INTERMITTENT SPECULATIONS

William O'Rourke

[Below are the original entries (June 2020-February 2021) of a diary I kept on my blog—<http://lorourke-theviewfromthecouch.blogspot.com/>—dealing with the pandemic and the end of the Trump Administration. I haven't altered the originals, beyond correcting some punctuation, and therefore they contain a number of grammatical and spelling eccentricities, the sort of errors haste makes. My intention is to retain the literary pressures of the lock-down, and, I think, I succeeded, at least in that regard.]

June 24, 2020— #1

As Dickens might have said, you have to be 74 and retired to be fully amazed by the paradoxical Corona virus world. To be among the high-risk group and to be minimally affected, at least in ways that matter. It was the worst of times, it was the best of times. **My life certainly has been affected**, both in superficial and fundamental ways. Yet I do what I have been doing. What has been stripped away is mostly the serendipitous, the new, the throning one never gave much thought to, those people semi-known, the well-known, the unknown. **When I was in my twenties and lived in New York City** I was often surprised by how alone one could be in such a highly and densely populated city. This, most obviously, was at night, late at night, largely before dawn. Walking down Fifth Avenue at two in the morning, being on the Brooklyn Promenade viewing the Bridge by oneself after midnight. The streets that could be so crowded, were often empty in many a neighborhood. **As a kid I was always struck** by the easy opposites: full, empty, high, low, etc. I considered myself an introvert and was never bothered by being alone, since that was a common condition for me, though I often overcame it, and as I aged I certainly pursued women when I could. In my early twenties that avocation only became a busy one after I acquired some notoriety. If you intend to write, you'd better be equipped with the ability to be alone. I certainly had that ability. **But, at 74, after what some would consider** a "full" life, it comes as a shock to have it all pulled out from under you, the proverbial rug swept away, by, bats, rats, whatever vile delicacies you can eat, buy, at a Chinese wet market. **One would have thought**—this one, at least—that you may have not seen everything, but enough at my age. Certainly, you wouldn't think that after three-quarters of a century you and the rest of the world would have a new experience, a pandemic affecting the entire globe, taking place almost all at once, the speed of light practically, or by flight, airlines linking the cities of the globe, in mere months. **I write fiction**, but I tend toward realism, so the fantasy and science fiction world may have put such a circumstance forward, and movies may have foretold such calamities, but I had never contemplated actually experiencing it. Nor given it much thought at all. Though, doubtless, some, many, have, evidently. I've contemplated nuclear war, though, thankfully, never experienced it. All sorts of things. But not a global pandemic visited upon everyone in such a short time. **The ironies pile up**: when we reached the nadir in our national politics—President Trump! The Clown in Chief!—we get to experience something brand new (in its

rapid spread), a hybrid virus, animal to human, with a multiplicity of effects, affecting many, all, millions. **But, if you are in, say,** a quiet place, a small Midwestern town, the strangeness doubles. Big cities are always strange, new, chaotic, rituals disrupted daily. But after three months, where everything has slowly shut down—and now, even after the so-called “phased” reopening—this town still hesitates and, with the largest employer, the University of Notre Dame, still shut now, during the summer, now upon us, remains eerily quiet. The atmosphere is not so much the one found in the Matt Damon movie, “Contagion” (2011), directed by Steven Soderbergh, but an older film, the 1959 black and white “On the Beach,” directed by, who else?, Stanley Kramer. For the hinterlands that movie captures the mood more accurately than “Contagion”: San Francisco’s empty streets, the way the invisible “fallout” spreads around the globe, invisible, capricious, etc.

Partly, it has to do with just such movement, the regions affected. There hasn’t been a true pandemic in America for a century, and, certainly, nothing like this one in my lifetime, the swiftness of its spread. “On the Beach” posits a dying world without much destruction of property, and it came before the general knowledge of the neutron bomb. The flow of air around the world dictates the victims. Again, the cast, besides being filled with stars, is a group of the mainly educated, worldly types. The mood is discussion and despair, masked with attempts at coping with the inevitable. “Contagion” is riots, mayhem, finally success. There is no success in “On the Beach.” (Kramer wasn’t “into” happy endings.) That matches the more pessimistic view of the current situation: No cure, more to die. **Death seems to be the governing metaphor** for our pandemic, along with the attendant social injustice. The death of jobs, the death of social life, the death of the poor, the disenfranchised. We have the Charlie Chaplin figure in the White House, playing any number of slapstick roles that Chaplin became famous for: “The Great Dictator,” in particular. Trump has managed to atomize the country, more so that it had been in the late 20th century. Obama brought it together for a brief period, somewhat, but Trump became the trigger for, once again, blowing apart the world Obama—or at least his true believers—hoped would come about. **The one percent,** the most comprehensive phrase of the last ten years, has profited from atomization, pitting, as it does, the one against the many, making solitary individuals the winner, in this case, a relatively few individuals. Well, the ninety-nine percent soldiers, so to speak, on. But it remains a numbers game. One of the many contrarian effects of the pandemic is that so many citizens have abided by the new “rules”, aping each other’s behavior, when they can and many have. One for all, all for one, so to speak. But there is a limit and three months seems to be it. **People were on the streets,** at least in Minneapolis. Not everyone was sheltering in place, only the compliant, the old, professionals working from home, retirees, the middle and upper-middle class. And certainly not the police. The authorities could dispatch four officers to a down-at-the-heels neighborhood store to check on a reported malfeasance. A counterfeit bill. I was once in a Kansas City, Mo. Panera (a long story) and a woman, a slight so-called African-American (how many generations could she be from Africa? Obama was, is, only one: the formerly downtrodden are often stuck with the hyphen. When was the last time you heard Anglo-American used?) was attempting to pay for her lunch with a twenty dollar bill, apparently a fake, and the clerk, a white woman, ancestral derivation unclear, objected. The patron was short, thin, oddly dressed, insofar as some sort of elegance had been achieved, but everything seemed threadbare, not quite right. There was some repartee about the bill and the woman retrieved it, leaving the meal behind, sauntering out retaining as much joie de vivre as the encounter allowed. I, the somewhat Irish American at a nearby table, eating my sad lunch, observed the playlet. The clerk rolled her eyes, and said something to a coworker, and the lunch crowd never stopped eating. **But, in Minneapolis,** the teenage

clerk at its corner store, hailing from some other ethnic group, called the police, but only after the six-foot-six male customer had departed with the purchased cigarettes. And that clerk had taken the bogus bill and had not objected, given the size of the person who gave it to him. George Floyd didn't go far. He was lingering outside the corner store, smoking doubtless. Minneapolis never sleeps, obviously, or has an abundance of law enforcement, since they sent four officers to the scene. And since there were people going to and fro (three months of quarantine having sprung leaks) and equipped as they were with the newer phones, with cameras better than the ones that went up with the earliest satellites, caught the denouement, the last nine minutes or so. The world got to see one of the last shows of the now canceled COPS, the snuff film version. The weird look of Officer Chauvin (nomen est omen, Officer Chauvinistic) peering at the onlookers with George Floyd passed out under the cop's knee to neck. **Speaking of knee to neck**, we'll turn to The Donald, our president. Nothing about him has been a surprise. More was known about Trump's personal life, public life, than any other previous commander in chief. The Right Wing had tried to make Bill Clinton's personal life known wide and far before he was elected, but those revelations paled compared to what those paying attention knew about Trump. He strove to be a public figure all his life. The more notoriety the better. Tabloids obliged over the decades. The American electorate is more than fickle—it is hugely ignorant, or, more gently, not over educated when it comes to picking its national (or even local) leaders. It prefers to forget. Let bygones be bygones. There's always the over informed minority, which is a category I sometimes occupy. Americans are good at what I have called "remembering to forget." It has helped the country move along over a couple of centuries. **Since his election** Trump has had his knee on the neck of the government, and it, at least all the GOP has obliged. The Imperial Presidency was denounced during the late Nixon years (recall the guards' ridiculous Gilbert & Sullivan uniforms), but in our present time it is clear that the Senate runs the world. So we have the epicene Kentuckian running our political world, enhanced by his dominatrix-seeming spouse. I suppose, over time, the three branches of our government are a shell game, each branch having its way for some period of time. The Senate, though, given Obama's sorry lack of experience and fight, has been in control for a while. **Nonetheless, the pandemic** was a gift horse that Trump looked in the mouth for too long a time. It was a gift. It could have been his redemption, of a minor sort. Something he didn't start, bring about, a world event he would be swept up into, the Wizard of Oz's tornado, Dorothy in the sky. But, Trump doesn't change, has no instinct for salvation. He does what he does, mainly fail, all those bankruptcies trailing behind him. So he continued to botch and bluster. And we are where we are.

June 30, 2020— #2

Poor Hillary. She has had, doubtless, a number of shocks in her life, though the ones I would catalogue might be different from her own list. But losing to Donald Trump! Jill Stein getting so many lefty votes! The Russians! All the African Americans who stayed at home! Etc! No Lurleen Wallace, she. A bit too much of noblesse oblige at work. Oh, to be hated by so many. It could have been averted, but her Brooklyn boys were far too boyish and she ran a lousy campaign. Where to begin? Everyone has their own list. **It was clear to me** by October of the election year that she would likely lose, though I continued to hope despite the evidence of my own eyes. I had an old, old friend who was on his last legs in Pennsylvania whom I visited a number of times that Fall. Driving through Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania is sobering in the best of times, but it was clear those three states would not be

voting for Hillary. I worried, too, about Wisconsin, given its futile fights with the terrible governor, the college dropout, Mr. I Won the Recall!, the wise young man of the Republican party, who knew something about nothing. And Michigan seemed hollowed out, tap water full of lead, empty lots, poverty, damaged businesses of the old sort, manufacturing, cars, etc. And that was after eight years of a Democratic president. Did Hillary ever go to Michigan? I'd have to look it up. She did come to South Bend, when she first ran eight years earlier, against Barack, the Great Black Hope. I stood three feet from her, but didn't introduce myself. ("Hey, I wrote a book about you!") But, in 2008, she seemed more... distant, slightly stunned to be in a minor league baseball field in Indiana. She did go to Mishawaka, a neighboring (white) town in '16, in May, when she also went to Michigan! (I looked it up). **Other than the always nettlesome Bernie** and his boys she had a certain path to the nomination. What deal had she made with Barack? I suppose it had to do with money, since both the Clintons and the Obamas seem so interested in it. Donald Trump turned out to be the two-edged sword: obviously beatable, though as famous as Hillary. Her Brooklyn crowd, and more so the heartland version of Hillary supporters, actually didn't know that much about The Donald. Clowns only require so much thought. But, the inverse was not true. America's bottom feeders of whatever geographical location knew a lot about Hillary, all bad, and so did the rest of the demographic ladder. TV has a lot of effects, though the one-of-the-crowd aspect really made Trump seem, well, all too familiar. **The evangelicals had a history** with the fallen, the TV preachers, especially. Televangelist, is the coinage. Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker, that lovely couple. The list continues. Today's crop a bit less gaudy. Donald Trump fell into that category. The Religious Right is all for redemption, the celebrants crazy as they are. Say Mike Pence. I, more than other commentators, have always favored vice presidents' influence on campaigns. They do help. The counter examples (Dan Quayle) usually just point out the weaknesses of the opposing presidential candidate. See Michael Dukakis. In any case, Pence is his zombie way added his celestial, other worldly, help to the thoroughly damnable Trump. **But even I, me**, would have never predicted the denouement taking place. Covid-19. Never, never, never. Though the disease swamped the world does have a Biblical ring: Plague, damnation, etc. Sunny warm days, full ICUs, the Southwest teeming with contagion. Not quite apocalyptic, but close, closer. **Gun sales**, it is reported, are increasing. Some percentage of the population is planning for things getting worse. Trump is still trying to get rid of "Obamacare", wanting to extinguish its name, if nothing else. Though it is hard to tell the difference, Trump does appear more addled than usual. I found it curious his admission (if true, hardly a given) that he had never slept overnight in Washington, DC, till he was elected President. Memories of his shallow life seem to be haunting him. His AG, William Barr, came out to Notre Dame last year and spouted Eighth-grade theology in a speech to a restricted audience at the law school—Notre Dame, where the Catholic Church does its thinking. Barr, too, seems to have regressed, gone back to his younger days, before he became Trump's tool. Barr shares with Mary Gordon the odd fact that his father was born Jewish, but jumped the Ark, became a Catholic, and a creature as far right wing as one could, also blessed with the same dollop of craziness he shared with Gordon's dad. Both married cradle Catholics. Sins of fathers aren't necessarily embraced by their offspring, but some traits do seem to get passed down with a too frequent regularity. Coincidentally, all three of us, Gordon, Barr, myself, were wandering around the same few upper-west-side blocks back in the late '60s, though we never met back then, attending Columbia and Barnard. **Death and disease** and the old men of Washington, DC, have taken up a lot of the news. Long in the tooth was the dominant image in '16, now again in '20. Including the titular Democrat nominee, Joe Biden. If only he could stay in the

basement till after the election. The turnabout that so suddenly happened—after it appeared that Bernie would actually capture the nomination—astounded me then and astounds me now. Its swiftness and finality, its one two three. My personal favorites, Amy and Pete, turned on a dime and Black Voters Matter worked its will. **Hard to believe** that happened the end of February, right before the world changed. Super Tuesday came next and it was a sweep for Biden, more or less, after every Democrat except the Bernie Bros threw their weight for the former veep. **Bernie gone.** It happened overnight, so to speak. And then History stopped and the new virus took over. At least current history as it used to be known, reported. The mass media became truly the mass media. Reporters, commentators, politicians, etc., sitting in their homes in front of their computers, laptops, whatever, Dell, Apple, and Microsoft sell and the Chinese make, giving opinions, reports, in mildly irritating visuals, garbled language transmission, amateur hour all around. Bookcases galore, some “authors” featuring their latest publication face front out. A lot of the upper-middle-class-favored decor on display. As noted before, three months seems to be the limit on restricted behavior. We are seasonal animals. George Floyd let the doors open and spilling out on the streets became the new norm. Weirdly, it gave the government(s) cover to do the same: let my people go, sort of. **Rallies of various sorts** continue: Floyd’s death blossoming into a thousand flowers, giving people the semi-sanctioned excuses to come out during the night and day. Similar previous killings have been unearthed. And July 4th is on the way. The Covid-19 contagion continues, “spiking” here and there—befitting plagues the vocabulary used is often medieval. The two great American scourges—a medical one, and a long-nurtured one, racism—continue to be on parade and it is not so strange at this stage of history they have become yoked.

July 14, 2020— #3

I have a long history with Roger Stone—at least in a literary way, insofar as I wrote about him in my 1997 book (Campaign America '96: The View From the Couch) about the 1996 Presidential campaign. Just a paragraph or two. It was a fairly long book, over 500 pages. Though I am struck by this bemusing fact quite a bit, no one seems to consult my remarks, however superficial they may have seemed back then. Not superficial to me—I was deliberately writing about the surface: in the book I wrote Stone looked a bit like John Dean, if Dean had taken a lot of steroids, and that Stone had a café con leche tan that appeared to have been applied with a paintbrush. And that the estimable publication, the National Enquirer, had a story with the headline: “Top Dole Aide in Sex Orgies Scandal” (poor Bob Dole) and Stone was taking to TV to defend himself. He was, as I wrote, El supremo tacky, and shared the suspect aura of the California GOP swinger set, epitomized by Alfred Bloomingdale and his consort Vicki Morgan. There were tabloid pictures of Stone and his buxom wife, charmingly outfitted, offering themselves as play-pals, etc. **Now we move on** to the Trump era—not that Stone vanished, no sir; he showed up in Florida during the Bush/Gore count-the-votes saga—but he had now arrived full flower with The Donald. Since I had written a book on the '96 campaign, I was still paying attention. But it shocks me how little attention the present crop of, mainly, news-people pay. Where is the collective memory of the press? I wonder. Why can't they add at least a sentence about Stone's colorful history in all the recent copy expended upon him? Well, one reason, I suppose, is that times have changed and Stone's past has become superfluous, given the President's colorful past, most everyone's past, shared by most all of those who have survived the last few decades. **I think that Stone** still has the same frisky wife (his second) when I catch a glimpse of her and him in short clips on TV, usually coming or going from a courtroom. Her outfits have changed,

but she still favors black. Stone, well, Stone looks like our 21st century take on Dorian Gray: he is the portrait itself, not the air-brushed simulacrum. **One point of my '96 campaign book** is that the inside has now become the outside. Sort of like the museum in Paris (the Pompidou Center), the one that's all pipes and beams and exposed structure on the outside, looking more like an oil refinery operation than a building housing art. It's architecture that resembles a genre of horror films, where and when some "human" is turned inside out. Anyway, Stone looks corrupt. And is. That face! Mouth! But who cares?, seems to be the modern take. Look at the President, etc.... Look at Lindsey Graham, whomever. But, the idea of the damning portrait still lives. Stone had Nixon's head tattooed on his back. Doubtless, Stone has willed his sketched flesh to some museum (in Paris?) for a lampshade to come. The long abused George Orwell once wrote that, more or less, after 50 every man has the face he deserves. Stone deserves his face. I suppose that's why, especially in Washington, DC, so much money is spent on men's clothes, to distract from the bodies within. **In addition to the inside/outside** phenomena, the bit players around Trump have become the main actors. Trump's crowd, rustling up all the former bit B-players in his orbit, hence Stone, hence all those Tea Party pols who are running the show in the Trump administration. My 1997 campaign book first captured Stone's essence in print, but he was elevated in the public mind by Jeffrey Toobin (who is nothing if not prolific), at least the selective public that reads high-end journalism. He rolls out books almost yearly on the scandalous, boys and girls, pols and performers. This summer we will be treated to his Trump book and I am sure we will revisit Roger and The Donald. Toobin wrote about Stone in 2008 (recall, for a minute, 2008) for the New Yorker (Yes, the New Yorker). Rereading the piece now, Toobin makes Stone seem positively wholesome, practically a Democrat (though of the Libertarian bent [and I mean bent]), a guy to contend with. Perhaps it's the New Yorker's style. Trump makes a brief cameo in the piece, criticizing, mildly, Stone. I would say times change, but they do and they don't. **Disease is a metaphor** often employed. Except these days it's literal, not figurative, and has the entire world paying some sort of obeisance to its power. The deadly and infectious virus is everywhere. Trump has always been, at least in the last three and a half years, a master of distraction. And, since he can make gold out of offal, he treats the pandemic as the coin of his realm, more distraction.

July 29, 2020— #4

The Corona virus is everywhere, everywhere in every sense of the word everywhere: geographically, locally, mentally, physically, in our dreams, Covid-19 spins its Dance of Death. As the 20th century cliché goes, it covers the waterfront. It controls the news, only allowing subsets of dying or death's handmaidens, mayhem and remorse. The upper west coast was one of the first centers of attention, the early cases in Seattle, and boisterous Portland has taken over, conducting its long-running, uninterrupted nights of protest. President Trump has chosen Portland to test out some of his fantasies, deploying his version of the privatized military to provoke the provoke-able. The evenings are filled with glowing white clouds, shooting-star projectiles, noise and confusion. **During the daylight hours** we have notable deaths and all their attendant pomp and circumstance. Given Covid at the helm we can't stray far from death worship. By circumstance and/or coincidence, since a Black death (George Floyd, death becomes him) was a trigger, the recent passing of Rep. John Lewis, retains the governing principle, Black Lives Matter, especially if they are in Congress. Pick the other notables who have gotten less play and reverence, those who are no longer with us. Monday and Tuesday's NY Times (7/27 and 7/28) finally spared us—at

least in its national edition sent to the rubes in the Midwest—a host of pandemic deaths. Monday's paper did devote a page (along with two other entertainers and a wine merchant) to a former star of *Gone With the Wind*. *Gone with the wind*, indeed. (Alas, spared only to Wednesday.) **Trump is attempting** to turn his ship of state in the Hudson River, an arduous task, given its size, rivaling the largest aircraft carrier the US has, christened the USS Gerald R. Ford, of all people. Trump the new mask booster (though remaining, in that regard, very low key), Trump the soother of the populace, resuming his “daily” briefings, brief indeed, petulant and bored reading, mostly, from a script. The first was him alone, the second added a human or two as props on the stage, and, who knows, if they continue someone else maybe allowed to talk. Or not. **Trump's Wall Street types** have now taken over the government, it seems, though not quite as steadily as Clinton's Treasury Secretary, Robert Rubin, managed to do(who, in DC back then, was often referred to as President Rubin), but we have been seeing a lot of Steve Mnuchin lately. Less of his wife, though, thank God. **Various pandemic storms** are on the horizon: the start of “schools”, of all stripes, elementary, “middle”, high school, college. The young are poised on the edge of various precipices, willing to jump off into the Covid pools and see how things go. It is the older teachers who are, in the main, balking. **Golf may be the only professional sport** that endures, given it is a lone man (predominantly) and a small ball and a club, instruments that go way back, to the cave man era, at least. Hard to kill off. And even if it becomes a “team” sport, there is little to no interaction. Baseball has aspects of individuality, though proximity and glad-handing often make it a crowd. It can be a contact sport. Tagging, etc. Ask the Marlins. Baseball may be on its last legs. B-ball, football, hardly need to be explained. Perhaps tennis can be spared. **The election looms**, another cloud over the country as a whole. Biden largely stays in the basement, a good strategy. He did emerge to talk at a safe distance with the former President, Barack Obama. That encounter was somewhat surreal, partly because it looked like a theater experience, a new play opening, two men talking on a stage. I found it highly ironic, two people who certainly know how to act, who have learned the rhetoric of the world. Something by a witty Brit, say, the late Harold Pinter, or Caryl Churchill. A one act. We're in an upside-down world. Obama, unfortunately, has a history of misjudgment. A pertinent example, thinking Hillary would make a better candidate than Joe. Imagine, for a moment, what might have been, if Biden had been the candidate four years ago—and had he the sense then to choose a Black woman as vice president, what might we have been spared. **But, it shouldn't be ignored**, the presidency has largely become a figurehead position, beginning with Reagan, who was the far more acceptable version of Trump, a public figure who could, at least, approximate, play, the role. Recall, Reagan had been an actor and an effective skill for the right-wing's favorite hobby horses. Today, Republicans put up with The Donald's shortcomings, because they have gotten, mostly, what they've wanted. The trouble is when King Kong gets loose from his cage and wants to climb up the Empire State building holding Lady Liberty in his mitt. If it wasn't for that pesky virus he might have been easily reelected. **Hillary, evidently, believed** the ubiquitous guff that the Veep doesn't matter in a Presidential campaign. I differ. I could make a list: take Dan Quayle, for one, a seeming loser all around, but, no, he made the Presidency possible for George W., Quayle being the “veteran” who plowed the hard ground of the Vietnam war hangover, softening it up for the home-based slacker W, who went on to defeat a vet who actually was in Vietnam. (And, at the time, I wanted John Kerry to be Gore's Veep—two actual in-country vets—but no one was listening to me.) The vice president selection always matters. Take note of Hillary's running mate, if you can remember him. **The less populated states**, down South and the Southwest, have taken the brunt of the plague the last month or so. They were ripe for the picking after

Trump-minions loosened restrictions. Covid has taken on a polio aspect: mysterious deficits even if “cured”. The young at the cusp of “school” aren’t succumbing at the same high rate, but they are being turned into human experiments. For possible effects long term. We shall see what we shall see. **The spirit of the protests** have altered, become largely events of the night. Darkness prevails. Violence ensues. Early on they were held in the daylight. Name changing has been fetish-ized. In that way, the early in-the-daylight protests have “won”—monuments toppled, brands rebranded, more words made taboo by the vocabulary vigilantes. **Now, especially in Portlandia**, in the dark of night the protests are turning into anti-Trump fests, with Fed rent-a-cops outfitted splendidly. We’re practically in August. When September comes we will all be enduring, on top of everything else, the campaign plague to come.

August 18, 2020— #5

I once had dinner with Kamala’s (Senator Harris, sorry) father—by the way, my spelling autocorrect wants to change her name to “Kabala”—at a pleasant restaurant called The Carriage House on the outskirts of South Bend, IN, about three decades ago. Donald Harris, Don. He was up for a Chair, as I recall, in the Economics department. He had been at Stanford since the early ‘70s. Why I was there is a long story. Nonetheless, he seemed charming enough, and I don’t recollect him mentioning either of his daughters, or wife. None of that is supposed to matter, in any case, in a hiring situation, though, of course, it always does. There were around ten professors feasting on the restaurant’s rarefied fare. Harris was, more or less, what was then short-handed as a “Marxist” economist (or, less prejudicially, Post-Keynesian), though he was in South Bend because ND had very few professors “of color,” as it is now called, though not back then, a quarter of a century or more ago. He had gotten his PhD at UC Berkeley, a school I was familiar with. A good time was had by all. **Harris was trim, conversational**, and, as Candidate Biden would have said, “clean”. Harris was also familiar with the Midwest, having had positions at three universities in shouting distance of South Bend. He didn’t join the faculty. The Dome balked at the Marxist part, however misguided. And his divorce, though not recent, wasn’t a plus. But professors well situated often use these hiring forays as leverage at their home schools. The English Department, though, if not the Economics Dept., was able to steal a professor from California (UC Berkeley). **One reason our candidate came** was to avoid all the service work he had been hijacked to do, Berkeley at the time not overrun with professors of color. Though, over time, ND saddled him with such work, but it wasn’t quite the same. He died here. But, I’m not intending to speak of Black professors’ careers at largely white universities. Harris’s daughter, though, will be speaking, not so much about her father, I suspect, who is still alive, but of people of color in America. Even the media is currently attempting to right wrongs. The New York Times has spent more than a month featuring black artists in its Arts section. In the Times’ case, it seems to be an act of reparations. **President Dumbo** (I guess I’m slandering the actual Disney Dumbo) continues his yammering harangues. The corona year has pushed our president over the edge, given that he had been skirting it for the first three years, to a new level of incoherence, and, though hard to believe, his vocabulary has even decreased. Don Harris has a much larger vocabulary, but anyone, especially any public figure, has a larger vocabulary, even television’s talking horse of yore. But I’m not likely to be asked to share a meal with Donald Trump. The presidency is said to age most, if not all, those men who have ascended to it. Especially eight years. Gray hair, etc., at the very least. Though it would be Dorian Gray if the Donald got eight years. His hair, obviously, is

impervious to change, as most of his aspect, but he does seem to be losing his mind, his gait, his physical prowess. Mostly micro at this point, but the unfriendly press makes a big deal of it. **One wonders if Indiana's former governor** is sleeping soundly these days, fearing he might be snatched from his bed during the night and replaced by another, the looming Nikki Haley, former UN maven, former governor, former former. Pence, though, I think only has to worry about some sort of unforeseen "accident", one that would render him replaceable sometime before Nov. 3. No one ever claimed politics was risk free. Joe and Kamala appeared on stage together this Wednesday. **Kamala has always been comfortable** with older men and it showed. Since the venue, some highschool that wouldn't have allowed Kamala to be a student up until the '70s (so a commentator claimed). Shocking, but to me just an unsettling reminder that 1970 was fifty years ago, the year I finished graduate school. I kept waiting for Biden to lose his way during the unveiling, but he didn't. It was still fairly early in the day, before the sun sets. He's becoming an afternoon sort of guy. So, as they say, it went well. Spouses appeared at the end. I would say a strange sight, those, but these days nothing is a strange sight. Trump, most everyone is saying, is floundering. I think of fish flopping, but he's lashing out, blurting out—the post office is against me, but I fixed them!—behaving badly, one enduring trait. **But I was happy to see all the white guys** behind him when he announced the UAE would be sending tourists to Jerusalem. Tourists, just what the Wailing Wall needs. The last time I was there it was hard to get close to the massive stones, but one can persist, and eventually smell the dust. I was in Israel right before the start of the second Intifada. And a lot has happened in twenty plus years. Netanyahu was out of power, in something like disgrace back then; Sharon, though, had been causing mischief. He would purchase homes of Old City Palestinians sotto voce, and constantly championed settlements everywhere. The Arabs weren't happy at all and though I had wanted to I never got to the Temple Mount. Crowds kept nonreligious visitors out. Corona still rules the day in the lower 48. **Schools have attempted to open**, with limited success. Other organized events have pushed forward, coping, some becoming electronic only, such as the Democratic convention, which started last night. My favorites were the Republicans, especially the former governor of Ohio, John Kasich. He was standing at the fork of a road not taken. One way to look at it, a single still photo from it (NYTimes web version) makes it seem that the sight (site) was some sort of modern scenic art, out in the wild, a green woman with white gravel legs. One sees what one wants to see. He and the preceding three Republican women did create a frisson of excitement of some sort, and an explosion of memory of what Democrats criticized way back when. Susan Molinari, of all people! **The three women GOP stalwarts** are doubtless what led me to see the grass and gravel female art work Kasich was standing on. The whole show was curious, but successful. Can't wait for the Republicans' updated American Carnage revue. Bernie and Michelle were swell Monday night. Sports lumber on, without "live" audiences, except for workers and owners, and those few looker-ons well connected. The Indy 500! The Post Office (USPS) brouhaha seems to be the only thing penetrating the public non-politically. It's a service, Stupid, as James Carville could have said. **The Donald couldn't have found** a better villain to head the PO. It takes real talent to have all the anti-PO credentials the new head—since June!—has amassed. Louis DeJoy—another nomen est omen; he's certainly taking the joy out of a lot of people's lives. He de-joys everything. Another example of The Donald's negative genius, if you want to call it that. Today, the Washington Post announced the USPS "will halt its controversial cost-cutting initiatives..." until after the election. Hooray! All those stolen dark blue mailboxes in trucks. He and Trump must have forgotten that Republicans occasionally mail things, too. [To be continued.] I am not bothering with links. I might supply them eventually.

September 4, 2020— #6

Last week seemed to be a family affair. The Trump family set the tone. And the many family units displayed in bits and pieces during the Republican convention—how about that lovely St. Louis couple toting guns waving at the passing Parade? Then there was the cute mom and son duo, Wendy Lewis Rittenhouse and her pudgy son, Kyle, shooter of three, killer of two, and the random children shot in various yards and houses, homicides that are more perennial than seasonal. The First Family first. The Trump show was more of an extravaganza than the Biden show. More circus than circumspection, more “spectacular” than specific, more Fox than PBS. **Though hard to do**, setting aside the use of the White House and other government buildings, the Trump week had two or three events that were somewhat grounded in reality, though the four days that encased them was a mountain hard to overlook. We were in Never Never Land most of the time. The final piece de resistance, the last night climax of a sort, the super spreader evening on the White House lawn, below the grand staircases of the Evita side of the building, folding chairs full of Republicans, most mask-less, all disreputable (behind every fortune there is a crime, etc.), of self-satisfied citizens, sprinkled with a few plants of ordinary folk to be used as pawns (echoing the balcony victims often alluded to in State of the Union speeches), showing their mettle, daring Covid to cloud their lives. The event, more or less, was as ephemeral as the fireworks display in front of the Washington monument, that Egyptian inspired obelisk, beloved by many, that spelled out TRUMP 2020. It was there and then not there. **But, Trump, who must be descending** into his dumbest dotage, didn’t leave the stage, but made the participants turn to face the balcony (no Evita!) and made everyone one listen to semi-operatic renditions of various tunes, including “Hallelujah”, the Leonard Cohen dirge. An overworked tenor, tie-less, sweaty, crooned on—and using opera “stars” to sing pop tunes is a bad choice always—till everyone was about to go crazy—Trump really knows how to step on his endings. Hallelujah, indeed. The tenor is named Christopher Macchio. God knows Trump might have been attracted to him by his name, Macho Macho Man, etc. Macchio did perform at Trump’s 2015 New Year’s Eve bash in Florida. And he seems to be an upscale lounge singer, one to wow the rubes with arias, though I couldn’t detect the usual opera star’s resume in his past. No Met debut, etc. **I didn’t know any of this** as I watched him, but without a tie, the open shirt, his sweating, he did seem a bit Las Vegas to me. I have had a long history with opera, working, starting when a teenager, in 1964 at the Santa Fe Opera. But, Macchio wasn’t the problem, just the coda to a very strange day, week, first term, and so on. It’s not so much these days what Kellyanne Fitzpatrick (as I knew her when I described her TV appearances in my ‘96 Campaign book, before her marriage to George Conway) called alternate facts early on in the Trump administration, as an alternate world that has been created. **It was on full display for four days**, with two or three exceptions, one striking one being the appearance of the unhappy parents of a young woman (Kayla Mueller) who strayed into Syria, was “captured” by ISIS in 2013 and tormented by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and doubtless others. Their testimony was effective, given its tone and content. They were obviously unhappy with Obama and Biden, who did not manage to free their daughter (she was killed, it was reported, in 2015). **Of course, neither did Trump**, but soldiers in late ‘19 launched an attack on Al-Baghdadi’s compound and, cornered, he blew himself up. The raid was named after Kayla. Her body has never been found. Her dad said, “The Trump team gave us empathy we never received from the Obama administration...the Obama administration said it was doing everything it could. The Trump administration actually

is....” Hard to counter aggrieved parents, however tragedy has distorted their vision. **One other trip in the real world**, at greater length, was from my distant relative—very distant—Melania, the Slovenian immigrant and First Lady. My maternal grandfather was Slovenian and was born in a village over the hill from Melania’s home town. Hence my claim to connection, however bogus. Melania is attempting to claim a transformation of sorts, one usually accomplished by older worldly women, who, after a lively life, retreat to the nunnery in old age. **Melania is still too young for such metamorphosis**, but in her Evita military uniform, marching alone—Trump had wandered out all by his lonesome before her speech—to the microphone, she was a picture of remorse, or, perhaps, seriousness. No easy smiles in this performance. Serious, earnest and measured, a mother’s speech. Empathy heavy. “My deepest sympathy goes out to everyone who has lost a loved one and my prayers are with those who are ill or suffering. I know many people are anxious and some feel helpless. I want you to know you are not alone....” Right on, Melania. She seemed alone. Her immigrant accent, her olive drab outfit, her frozen head looking forward, her serpentine, or, rather, lizard-like eyes locked for a few minutes on one clear prompter, then they would slide over for the same amount of time to the other, a back and forth that became decidedly discomfoting as she went on, my phantom relative. She does have my grandfather’s cheekbones; or, rather, he has hers. **Well, at least she seemed to occupy planet earth**, or a recognizable populated one. Her audience was the typical Trump mask-less crowd, highlighted by the extravagance of the last night to follow, Trump’s own low-energy hour long rehash of his far too many speeches. Melania has never sounded more like an immigrant in her address. Jackie Kennedy had a distinctive voice, cosmopolitan in its way, worldly, but its undertones were American, the Marilyn Monroe breathy-ness, but not Melania’s static discourse. Her outfit was telling. Its slightly authoritarian cut was, is, echoed, in her voice. Somewhere from beyond, not the rainbow, but the Iron Curtain. **That semi-oxymoron, Iron Curtain**, seems to capture Melania. I wouldn’t ever refer to her as soft. Melania seems to be open game these days, given a new “tell-all” book just published that contains transcripts of her phone calls, catching her in her catty glory, talking to Stephanie Winston Wolkoff, a friend, author of Melania and Me. Perhaps Melania will get herself to a nunnery quicker than I thought. With friends like these.... **Wendy Lewis Wittenhouse**, another mother with a young boy, remains at large, a mystery of sorts, given the limited info floating around. Her son reminds me of another killer, the child killer of Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, though Adam Lanza was at least 20. His mother, who came to an unfortunate end, shall we say, encouraged Adam’s eccentricities, as Wendy has obviously promoted Kyle’s enthusiasms, the burden, I suppose, of a lot of “single” mothers. We do have one cute picture, Wendy beaming next to her officer be-suited, besotted, son, Kyle’s youthful face betraying the absence of much lived experience. **WE BACK THE BLUE** festoons a bunting stripe defacing the photo. But Kyle was going to catch up and Wendy was there at his side. Now **Adam was convincingly out of his mind** and grandiose in his actions, whereas Kyle was, is, much more modest; his fellow gun lovers are attempting to make a right-wing hero out of him. There aren’t many teenage young men ready for such an honor and they jumped at the chance, perhaps prematurely, but since Kyle is very premature, they have a lot to work with. Since a large percentage of protestors in Kenosha seem to be from out of town, especially those who prowl the streets around midnight, it’s hard to tell who’s who without a scorecard. If Kenosha was Beijing the Chinese would doubtless be able to identify every face through the ubiquitous cameras available. But our computer geeks are working on it. Trump, of course, showed up a couple of days ago in the daylight, attempting and succeeding at setting the news, directing the cameras in his

direction. Biden came and went, too, with a speech in Pennsylvania, trying to be the reasonable guy compared to the red-tied lunatic. This is thankless position to be in, the Republicans always getting to be pro, the Democrats con. **Television tends toward spectacle**, not reason. The moderate has no place on the tube, or flat screen. If you arrive at the correct answer, the question is over. Biden is moderation personified, except when he goes off the rails. Trump has abandoned moderation in all its forms, except for his curious fear of alcohol, from which he abstains, replacing it with pharmaceuticals. Biden finally made it to Kenosha on mission to do the opposite of Trump, talking with the victims. **The longer Biden talks** the more one holds one's breath, waiting for him to go off the rails. In a church lecture going on at length about taxes, he did, saying if he didn't stop talking his host would shoot him. Oh, well. It's not so much age-related, since Biden has always done this. But his handlers should give the hook after a half hour. Here at home we have seven year olds shot in the head at birthday parties. There has always been kids killing kids, playing with guns, but this was a drive-by, a big crowd outside, shots fired. **We're some ninety miles from Chicago**, where, for many years, even before I became a weekly columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times, back in the last of that paper's heyday, I would read the Chicago Tribune, which seemed to exist to report the number of children who had been killed one way or another in the city the day before. But, slowly, over the decades, South Bend has become a suburb of Chicago and its bad habits have come this way. A couple of kids were killed the last two weeks, one the usual way, one child shooting another after having latched on to some adult's gun. **But, more recently, less than a week ago**, there has been the drive-by, the party murder, a Chicago staple. It, too, was a weekend killing, a popular time of recreational activity. The seventy or so people at the party would lead one to believe that some reveler might have recognized the car and occupants. It was still light out. But the See No Evil crowd still exists. In any case, all the family activity of last week was exhausting and much of it disgusting.

September 25, 2020— #7

The Donald seems, more or less, out of control. RBG dies, not able, unfortunately, to hang on till January. Today (or yesterday) Trump is heckled in the politist way, "Vote Him Out," by bystanders waiting to pay homage to Ginsberg's coffin and corpse. The Prez was bemasked, at least, offering up that small bit of respect. But that won't last long. We will learn Saturday if our local girl, ACB—couldn't get the alphabet right there—is truly the nominee for the Supreme Court, though her house's lawn is outfitted with the newest 21st century electronic gear and a guy in a black car watching. It made me wonder if other circuit court judges get that sort of treatment, protection, or just likely SC nominees. **Trump, to stoop to cliché**, is the most appropriate bull in a china shop, if anyone thinks, or still thinks, of the White House and the Presidency as a china shop. But it turns out that the Presidency is: norms more easily broken than most would have thought. American Carnage, Trump's Inaugural address's title, keeps proving itself prophetic, with The Donald causing the most carnage. **These days Trump continues** to do his Mussolini imitation, chin up, bombast forward. The spoiled child won't leave the house, stamping his foot and anything else he can find to stomp. Somehow my mind turns to the crucifixion—it's probably Amy Semple McPherson's fault, or her new incarnation, Amy Coney Barrett (why couldn't she have hyphenated her married name as Amy Barrett-Coney, then I would have had ABC, one two three, you and me, etc.? Oh, I forgot, the People of Praise.) Another morbid spectacle ahead, the Golgotha of Senate confirmation. **Speaking of the People of Praise**, I know it well, or well enough, since they lived, modestly, in the neighborhood some time ago,

where I owned my first house in South Bend. A few modest one story houses, they. South Bend was, is, a magnet for all sorts of extreme Catholic cults. A large Opus Dei house was down the block from my lesser dwelling. Tell it to that other dead, now long dead, Supreme Court justice, or the sitting AG. I arrived to teach at Notre Dame in 1981. People of Praise had started there about ten years earlier, given that its founder, or cofounder, was a PhD candidate in the theology department. He had published a book in 1969 called *Catholic Pentecostals*. **When I moved into South Bend** People of Praise seemed harmless enough. I knew the Catholic Left well, not so much the Catholic Right, though it took off right at the same time the CL peaked. The Harrisburg trial did sully the Catholic Left's reputation and, in a way, mobilized the right. The Berrigan brothers had always been a thorn in the side, so to speak, of devout Catholics. In South Bend the most prominent feature of the People of Praise was their school, the Trinity School at Greenlawn (however modest the professants are, they do lean toward highfalutin titles), housed in a former robber baron's mansion and grounds. It came about the same year I started teaching at ND. It taught 6-12 grades and I toured it some years later when my son was about to enter highschool. That's another story. **Speaking of titles, PoP have scuttled** some of their original vocabulary. I was sorry to see "handmaiden" go. Blame Margaret Atwood. They have the common cult interconnected relationships, used to knit followers together and the women members (ACB!) were given, or assigned, handmaidens as, let's say, watchdogs. Given PoP's sanctities, if you put them on one end of the smallish cult spectrum, the religious end—forget the Mormons—the other end would have something like Nxivm perched there. American culture was is, riddled, with such groups. One could even make the case that it was founded by them. Or, at least, joining became and remains an American virtue. Mayor Pete has put South Bend on the political map and now Amy the judge may set the bar for lawyers. She does have somewhat local competition, insofar as the Chief Justice is from down the road, and went to a small school, a basketball power, La Lumiere, another Catholic school. Roberts, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Sonia Sotomayor, and Brett Kavanaugh are all Catholic. And, one associate justice, Neil Gorsuch, appointed by Trump, was raised Catholic, but in his high falutin' way became Episcopalian, even though he attended the same tony Jesuit high school that Kavanaugh did. More civilized, I suppose. **Now there looms Amy**, who knows how to talk in tongues, which should help in a few cases to come. She would make the number of Catholics, according to my count, 6 and a half—the half being Gorsuch. This may or may not seem excessive to some people. I have written about this, all the Court Catholics, etc., in one of my books, opining, as the annoying say, that the right wing finds Catholics more Court friendly than wild-eyed, right-wing Protestants. Maybe. So, we'll see Saturday. I could be wrong. There's still that Cuban-American-Floridian (Barbara Lagoa) in the running. Isn't she Catholic? Doesn't she have blonde hair highlights (dyed?)? The Donald likes blondes. Doesn't he need to win Florida? But isn't the Cuban vote already in his pocket? The old, yes, but perhaps not the young. And if South Bend's Amy gets it, will they take offense?

October 2, 2020— #8

Well, look where we are now. The Covid denier has Covid. Even though The Donald yammered on to Bob Woodward way back when about how dangerous the Corona virus was, he was worried about "panic" (a nebulous and unlikely fear) and broadcast the opposite to we, the people. Now, as they say, it has come home to roost. I have been struck, given the various Air Force One tapes the media have been running, how much the White House crowd resembled a Frat or Sorority House party: dressed to the nines, chatty as hell,

commingling happily, and Hope Hicks, the reigning hot number, striding along in six inch heels, ready to board the plane and whatever else. It's not a matter of the other shoe (or high heel) to drop, but whether the entire footwear store will implode. Time will tell, those ominous three words. **The first "debate" is over.** It didn't seem to please anyone. The second debate—not pensive Pence and harried Harris—but the next "Presidential" debate may never take place. I will miss its town hall style, seats sparsely filled with so-called undecided voters. This sort of gathering is the summoning of the lame and halt, politically speaking, the slice of the electorate in play. Save us Lord. As Mike Pence might say. Each four years we get to see the average American psyche, housed in those who can't seem to make up their minds. If, somehow, Democrats manage not to lose the election instead of packing the Court they might just make the president's term six years and no more. **"No more" is what you want to say** about a lot of this. Amy Coney Barrett, at this time Covid free, is making the rounds of Senators, the friendly ones now, Republicans all. Her picturesque religious past is actually being downplayed thus far. Imagine, attacking religions!, the non pious have been saying, meaning any number of godforsaken GOP types. It is now confirmed, thanks to the local paper, that she is against abortion. Big surprise, it seems, for the rest of the country. Speaking of religion, I still imagine Trump resigning after he loses (if he makes it that far and if anarchy doesn't break out) to let the former Catholic Mike Pence become President in order to grant The Donald an all encompassing pardon, along with anyone else with whom he shares DNA. The Covid cases throw any predictions into the hopper, though. **What continues to provoke me** is that all of what we are experiencing was more than predictable: when Trump won, gathering less votes overall than Mitt Romney, many things were clear, other than the end of our world, thanks to Covid. What could be worse?, I thought at the time, to put this criminal clown in charge. The undecideds back then broke for Trump and many, far too many, former Democrat voters abstained. And, for equally though different demented reasons, today's as-yet-undecided voters can't seem to make up their minds. Somehow these folk vote for the person, not the party. **I blame Ralph Nader for many things**, but one chief complaint is that he convinced a lot of people decades ago that the two parties were more or less the same. The Dems and Repubs once might have been close, but they haven't been since the flip-side huckster television produced loon, Ronald Reagan. I take that back. Not the Reagan part, but the historic date. The party of FDR was far, far different than that of Wendell Willkie, etc.

In any case, there's nothing, it seems, we can do about the undecideds. The last minute pickers. Impulse voters. Some people do change over time. The young occasionally become more wise. Some thirty days remain and, thanks to Jim Comey, who, thanks to the recent movie ("The Comey Rule"!), is now again a star, it is implanted in most careful observers' brains, that things can change the last ten days of the election. And even now the specter of Proud Boys clogging voting centers seems likely. Trump does manufacture slogans: Stand back, Stand by. **We've already had hanging chads**, and worse lies in wait. Right now, the current spectacle might be a rerun of the Beauty and the Beast happening simultaneously. Amy Coney Barrett being the beauty and you know who being the beast. I, unfortunately, tend to blame Obama for our present condition. I realize that may be extreme, but he didn't seem to learn much from his, say, seven years as president. One example: when he put up Merrick Garland for the Supreme Court he showed an opaqueness that ranks as criminal. He was still trying to please the other party, be a conciliator, give those raging animals a choice that they couldn't possibly be against, a sixty-five year old, fairly middle-of-the-road, well-known judge. And then Mitch McConnell bit Barack's head off. He became a seven year president. Somehow, Obama thought, after seven years of being pushed around, he still

could win over the Republicans. With his charm? All Obama proved was that the Senate was the most powerful of the three branches of government. **Obama let Hillary hang** by never quashing the Russians' effective meddling in the election. The FBI might be able to smear her campaign, but Obama's default to propriety ruled the day. His desire to have a woman become president after his historic election, was, shall we say, mild. Just as Bill Clinton's legacy was George W. Bush, Obama's legacy is Donald Trump, Covid-19 and all. Water under the bridge, I know. Worse has occurred and worse is yet to come.

October 9, 2020— #9

One thing that continues to amaze me about The Donald and his "Presidency" is that he continues an upward graph of weirdness. It's a talent, of sorts, I have to acknowledge it. The past couple of days he has been helped by actual craziness, in the form of his fairly secret medical treatments, his steroid dose, which has caused a Ruling Roid, or Roid Ruling, or his threatening William Barr for not indicting Barack Obama, or Hillary, or whoever is on Trump's long list of criminals who need to be caged. **The Speaker of the House wants to employ the 25th Amendment.** Well, that's not likely with Mike Pence sitting there in wait. I've had a long history with Pence, writing about him since before he was governor of the state of Indiana, where I live. I wrote about him in 2016, saying he was Mitch Daniels with fewer brains. And I've never been impressed with Mitch Daniels' brain. But Pence, who slithered into the position after Daniels, seemed more of a hallowed/hollow shell, and other than being, becoming, a right-wing evangelical—the opposite sort of Justice Neil Gorsuch, Pence, like Gorsuch, growing up Catholic, though, after college, instead of becoming high-church Episcopalian, chose low-church Evangelical. Pence knew what side of the electorate his bread was buttered on in Indiana and, I suppose, Gorsuch did too, having higher aspirations, and more lofty company in mind. **Anyway, Pence filled the flat TV screen** for 90 minutes the other day, some sort of visual contrast to Kamala Harris, one alive and animated, the other dead(?) and moribund. At least the fly thought he was dead. Two minutes! Pence's eyes became redder and redder as the debate droned on and I thought, at any moment, the stage would become the set of a Hammer movie and Dracula would emerge. Glad that didn't happen. **And speaking of Hammer films,** the public anointing of Judge Amy Coney Barrett was something out of a bad movie script (or crypt). It's aftermath, at least. It was as if the Deity (or whoever) was hurling thunderbolts of Covid germs down on the crowd's heads. It appeared someone on high was not pleased. People of Praise look out. **The White House as plague hotspot.** Hasn't been a good few days for the GOP. Not that Democrats have been spared. The governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, keeping in the pop culture world, looks straight out of the Addams Family, especially the 1964 version. This resemblance has only been enhanced by her almost daily appearances for months speaking of Covid in Michigan. And her "signers" in the background have added to the casting resemblance, given the nature of their work, which, most often, requires broad gestures and pronounced facial expressions. It's a mad, mad world. Nonetheless, some rough and ready mainly Michigan types have been indicted as potential kidnapers and general trouble makers. It seems FBI informers and plants are involved, so I'll wait to hear where the brains came from. In cases like these the deep thinkers are often supplied by the FBI. The perps all have beards, which makes them look like deep cover Jihadists of sorts. **Things are getting crazier** and, given Trump on the loose, it'll doubtless get even more so.

October 21, 2020— #10

Though almost all brief assessments are faulty, I offer these two concerning the last and current presidencies: Obama came into office inspiring such high hopes and failed them all, whereas Trump came in only presaging dread and fear and he fulfilled them all. For certain Democrats, at least. Now the same folk, including me, are awaiting Obama's vice president's triumph over The Donald, but are standing on unsteady legs, fearing the worst, while hoping for the best, or whatever cliché seems most appropriate. Riots at the polling places? Absentee ballots being burned in the public square? All of this drama begins in two weeks, more or less. **Back in 2016**, I was disturbed by the photo of Trump that NBC used most regularly and prominently, because it seemed to be a publicity shot, not strange, since NBC was the host and semi-creator of Trump's long running show, "The Apprentice." The trouble was that Trump, the candidate, didn't look much like the photo. His hair, that is. In the photo, it was business-man standard, a mixture of silver highlights, gray, a bit brown. It was the network's go-to shot. The problem was that Trump's hair color was orange, sometimes more blonde toned, but certainly stuck at that end of the spectrum, a decidedly Florida hue. On NBC that photo has been turning up again in 2020. All of TV, I suppose, is fantasy land, but NBC, its top brass, still seems to be in The Donald's camp. What's good for television is good for, etc. **Putting the Trump "town hall" right up against Biden's version** on ABC seemed to certify some not so latent aura of connection. Though the moderator, Savannah Guthrie, was more aggressive than Bill Clinton's former lap dog, it appeared that NBC couldn't cut the cord on the entertainment factor. Obviously, all is entertainment these days, everything is ratings driven, and the mob wants its human sacrifices in the arena. Even the New York Times has surrendered to this ethic. The Gray Lady is gray no more. Full pages of graphics, art, photos, eye candy, almost no text. The Times seems to be turning into a weirder newsprint version of Vanity Fair and the last six months or so, it's become so heavily Black centric, it seems to be making up for its long, long history of discrimination and neglect. **Whatever**. The FBI, as I mentioned in my last blog entry, has continued its wacky kidnap case of the governor of Michigan. I've wondered if Trump's recent criticism of Gov. Whitmer, inspiring his MAGA crowd at the Muskegon county airport, after the case had come to light, to chant Lock Her Up, would inspire the Feds to name him and them as unindicted co-conspirators in a subsequent legal filing. A lot of the TV press has expressed dismay at the plot outlined, kidnaping the Addams Family governor, taking her off to the woods, having a trial, doing a citizens arrest, letting her ultimately go, after sufficient humiliation, etc. Such a plot! Though one familiar to me, since I wrote a book about just such a charge and trial and behavior back in 1972, The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left. None of the Dumbo Michigan "Wolverine Watchmen" conspirators (most sporting the usual tasteful Jihadists beards) would have noticed the similarities, but there's a small, very small, chance that one of the FBI implant handlers in the group would have heard of it back at Seat of Government (SOG), the phrase gumshoes use, or used, to refer to headquarters. The FBI requires informants. **Life continues to get stranger** and few and fewer seem to remember anything beyond the day before. That's what happens when you go from a literate culture to an aural/visual one. Images dominate, not words. Trump, of course, is the epitome of this change. His fifty-word vocabulary suits the times. But, this Thursday, we are told, will be the last debate. The Last Debate. Ominous itself. That one, as they say, will be a humdinger, a real knee slapper. And guess what Network is "airing" it? Yes, NBC. I'll be interested to see what stock promotional photo they use of Trump. I won't expect to see orange hair.

October 30, 2020— #11

The presidential race of 2020 has forced me to think about the presidency. Not much that has happened in the Trump years is a surprise, depending on one's own memory. How good it is, so to speak. When it was clear in 2016 that Trump would win I began to think of his predecessor, or his most obvious counterpart. That, of course, was Ronald Reagan. But it was a case of yin and yang, of inside, outside, Jekyll and Hyde. Reagan being the Dr. Jekyll, Trump the Mr. Hyde. **Yes, this was flip side politics.** Reagan was a TV star, exploiting nascent television for decades. I recall as a youth my seeing him pitch for General Electric. Both on its Sunday show during the '50s and then on the road thereafter. The term used for the fame that brought him to the mega-firm's attention was, is, "second lead," in his weird film career, marked by some schizophrenic casting, mainly criminals and dunces. For those who would leap to point out differences between Reagan and Trump, since Reagan was governor of California, I have two words: Arnold Schwarzenegger. **Reagan, though, unlike Trump,** was the soft side of craziness, of the far right wing, of Hollywood blowhards. Even I am willing to admit Reagan was more substantial than The Donald. Trump is the ultimate bottom feeder, a barely literate spokesperson for the rabble, a rabble that delights in the similarities between its commander in chief and themselves. He reassures all their half-baked deformed ideas and notions. He, truly, is one of them, except, of course, for his money, life style, and entitlements. The Republicans who share those qualities did vote for him, despite the example of those public figures who have quite noisily abandoned the GOP. **If Trump is the Dorian Gray portrait** version of Reagan, I am slightly straining the analogy and not giving enough credit to Reagan. But, Reagan perfected the treacle presidency, whereas Trump has perfected the opposite. I never associated Halloween with the presidential election till this year, even though there won't be any typical Trick or Treating this year. Nothing, of course, is typical in 2020, nor the earlier three years. **The debacle of the latest Supreme Court appointment** points out any number of things: one of the more obscure is how Republicans have managed to stack the courts over the years. Democrats, much to their, our, detriment, haven't pushed the importance of the Court in past elections. I have, but to no avail. Part of the problem is the Democrats' overconfidence in their positions and ideas and chances in presidential elections. Gore should have won. Hillary should have won, etc. In the sitting Court, the Bushes (G. W. B. and G. H. W. Bush got two and one, Clinton one, Obama two [both women], and The Donald three), so you see, the current six to three conservative v. liberal count leaves the Democrats at a two to one disadvantage. But, you can also see that Gore was supposed to beat George W. and, of course, Hillary was supposed to have defeated Trump. Both those elections were, so to say, close. **Of Trump's three appointments,** I currently see Kavanaugh's as the most disastrous, in the sense that he seems the most unhinged. He seemed unhinged when his confirmation process hit the rocks and his early adolescent and college life was gone over, roasted for its privileged ridiculousness. I, too, went to an all boys Jesuit highschool, the same one Hillary's veep attended. So I know the Kavanaugh type. It, too, will always be with us. It would have been better if more time on Kavanaugh's history as a Republican operative and stooge would have been as thoroughly combed through. He, of course, wasn't the first Justice who worked in the rag and bone shop of Republican politics, but Kavanaugh more than others seemed to relish all the unpleasant work he did. Down in the Florida recount, and working hard for that wonderful man Ken Starr, etc. **When women charged Kavanaugh with various indiscretions,** he took it badly. In the last days of his confirmation hearings, when questioned by Senator Amy Klobuchar, Kavanaugh was so defensive he seemed to think he wouldn't survive the grilling and finally

reach his promised gold ring, his seat on the Court. Oh, he of little faith. We learned he likes beer. Doubtless he still does, given the incoherence of his latest judgments. **The Court will suffer for decades** on Kavanaugh's watch. And then there is the newest Trump appointee, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, giving Trump a modern record of SC appointments. Ah, yes. My knowledge of Justice Barrett is at least close up, if not extensive. She has always seemed, to me, the ultimate Good Student. I've had a number of them over my decades as a professor. What they seem to lack, in the aggregate, are original ideas. But, alas, in the time ahead, we will have that tested on the Supreme Court. I hope she has a few original ideas, but, given what is on the record, it seems she is indeed the best of the best of Good Students, and if she only has her formative years growing up as a noted People of Praise member to have nurtured them, God help us all.

November 4, 2020— #12

It's déjà vu all over again, as the redundant say. Last night's election results reveal how little change has occurred in America's political life, or voting life, to be more exact. Back in 2000, the dawn of the new century, millennium, whatever, I published a column in the "Chicago Sun-Times" called "Yahoo Nation." **The following is an excerpt:** *George W.'s America is Yahoo Nation...a large, lopsided horseshoe, a twisted W, made up of primarily the deep South and the vast, lowly populated upper-far-west states that are filled with vestiges of gun-loving, Ku-Klux-Klan sponsoring, formerly lynching-happy, survivalist minded, hate-crime perpetrating, non blue-blooded, rugged individualists. Yahoo Nation, George W.'s electoral bundle—save contested Florida, the toss-up state—contains not one major city, nor one primary center of creative and intellectual density.* **Looking at the current map** of yesterday's election we see something disturbingly similar. But the sentence I want to point out is the last one above, the remark about Yahoo Nation containing not one major city, nor one primary center of creative and intellectual density. Well, the new map, the Donald Trump Map, makes things even clearer, so transparent none of the highly paid TV types bothered to mention it. I think they might have been afraid to. **What was unmentioned**, in the more advanced maps of 2020 (though still red and blue) was the detail of the city-versus-the-country divide. If there was some small spot of blue in a large state out West, or Midwest, it was a college town. Otherwise, they would be found in the states' big cities. Thinking of the most cosmopolitan here: Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, four states over the last two decades invaded by refugees (and tourists) from California, New York, and other east and west coast places of enlightenment, not even counting the new immigrants from around the world. **There are two Americas now**, the rural and the urban. There are a lot of reasons for that chasm, some contradictory. Socialism for farmers, Capitalism for the cities. Though the "farmers" that profit are the largest corporate farms, those that make use of economics of scale, in crops, land, and government handouts. Subsidy is a favorite word out in the so-called hinterlands. Texas is going through its own transformation, but its new self hasn't hatched yet. **What is to be done?** Find a Democrat, I suppose, who can talk to both "farmers" and citified flaneurs. Good luck with that. As of this writing it appears that Biden/Harris have a decent chance to win, to begin a crippled term with the mean, mad Mitch running the Senate, and a depleted Majority for a Leader handling a feckless House. A Pyrrhic victory is better than none at all. Judges can still be appointed and with luck one of the 6-3 conservative majority on the High Court could disappear and be replaced. It will be four years of ugliness, but Biden and Harris can save us from the worst. Imagine if The Donald had captured his second term! Almost unthinkable. (I hope.)

November 13, 2020— #13

Given the results, the number of voters, the actual count, it appears clear that the likelihood of a Biden/Harris victory was less than the faulty polls forecasted. It wasn't a squeaker, but it took days to conclude and nearly a hundred million "absentee" votes. This is depressing on any number of levels. The Democrats lost a handful of things in early November of 2020, mainly, it appears, a half dozen seats in the House, and control of the Senate—the Georgia special elections could change that, but two wins may well be one Congressional district too far. Stacey Abrams may be a magician, but rabbits out of a top hat, if the hat be Georgia, may strain even her handy legerdemain. **It would require a miracle of sorts.** And how many miracles can we stand? The Corona Virus can be seen as an especially perverse miracle—insofar as it powered the defeat of Donald Trump. Biden/Harris won by close to five million votes, but the lion's share of those came from California. What seemed to be the chief mover of the suburban ladies was Trump's inept handling of the plague. Yet, luckily, the winning margins in the re-blued states, MI, PA, WI, were all in the five figures, as held true for the other new blue states, Arizona (barely) and, still perhaps, Georgia. Nothing like 2000's meager 537 in Florida, allowing Bush to beat Gore, with the help of the Supreme Court. **The Donald wasn't able to give the Corona virus** his full attention: it's often hard to imagine his "full attention." That presumes a completeness Trump may lack in all things. Though Democrats aren't as proficient in the spinning of conspiracy theories as the GOP is, here's one, one that requires Divine Intervention: The Pandemic itself interceded. Evolution seems to require accident as well as design. Where's Darwin when we need him? In any case, the election year commenced with Bernie Sanders on the way to seeming victory in the primaries. But two things happened before Covid took over the landscape. South Carolina became the dike keeping the Bernie Bros from swamping the Democrats. Mayor Pete and Senator Amy dropped out, anointed Biden right before Super Tuesday, and, with their abdication, cemented the anti-Bernie vote for Biden. **The rest, as they say, is history**, though history and everything else came to a halt for the Pandemic. Biden in the basement, Kamala made Veep candidate, millions affected, hundreds of thousands dead, Trump being Trump, his incompetency, now, shown to be fatal. Yet, nonetheless, he got 71 million votes to Biden/Harris's 76. Though Biden's main campaign pitch was that he would be the president for everyone, 71 million voters wanted The Donald to be theirs, and theirs alone. One could be forgiven for thinking half the country wanted even more Trumpism, though the other half wanted Trump disappeared. His loss of the Oval Office is apparent, his absence from the public's attention is not. But, again, the luck of drawing to multiple inside straights in many districts came from the worried reaction to the virus. Trump retained more adherents than most commentators predicted, virus be damned. **In the current eerie interregnum** Trump is installing "loyalists" in every office he can get his hands on. One wonders why, though what he is doing has the putrid odor of a third-world would-be coup, the storming of the power centers, the Pentagon, etc. From Trump, none of this is surprising, though his core government power brokers appear—hard to believe—yet more odious. Secretary of State Pompeo (nomen est omen, since it's harder to be more pompous than he) looms fat and crazy, staying away from the homeland, cultivating God Knows What as he plans his future. Mitch McConnell does his lesser vampire impersonation, his body getting transfusions of some sort (those bruised taped hands!) in order to do The Donald's—the impailer—bidding. The rest of the GOP Senators, except for the occasional Mormon, continue to play the undead, mumbling that votes still need to be counted, as soon as they are manufactured. That wall may begin to crumble soon. Trump may be bad, but in a

big-bad-baddest competition, he's got rivals. Why does McConnell get to hold his members together, a solid block of awful, whereas Senator Schumer has uncontrollable outliers, such as West Virginia's Senator Joe Manchin? I know, I know, one's a minor vampire, the other is not. **But the problem that still looms** is all the voters Trump got, retained. Their allegiance, their solidarity. Our Fellow Americans, so to speak. Time may continue to be halted, certainly deformed, because of the Pandemic, but three years from now I dread the election that will be upon us. Given Biden's age and the state of the Union, I only see a horror show ahead. Who expects the Republicans to have regained their souls, stolen from them all by The Donald. And his "base"—they, it, will still be here, the deluded and the corrupt and the profiteers. It's a spectrum of foul smells, regions, income, and clearly nowhere to escape it.

November 20, 2020— #14

It's seven days before Thanksgiving and there are a few things to give thanks for, as much as that might be a dubious claim. How about a vaccine sometime (probably late) in 2021? How about The Donald being ejected from the White House? That, unfortunately, still seems up in the air, maybe the same air where the vaccine resides. Now I completely believe Joe Biden won, as they used to say, fairly and squarely. By a lot. Nonetheless, Trump being Trump, madness continues. The clown show remains prime time, the latest iteration being Rudy Rudy Rudy, the rude, leaking dye, or hydraulic fluid, whatever, from both temples. Temples it is. The Church of Crazy, Giuliani and his two henchwomen, both lawyers, Trump's "legal team." **In any case, who would have not have imagined** anything different. Like most of the late Trump antics, his most recent forays are yet more exaggerated. Exaggeration is often cited as late life behavior, and Trump has no shortage of it. His adherents are the truly alarming throng. Trump is an old reliable show at this point. His wacky cronies will endure, in some form, longer than The Donald. He back to TV and Never Never Land. Until 2024, but not even me believes he will be on a ticket to run. From Sing Sing perhaps, if New York State officials have anything to do with it. **I am not sure why the Secretary of State** thinks Israel is the key to his acquiring the GOP nomination for 2024. Puzzling. Most of the answers reek of anti-Semitism, in the twisted way What's His Name believes in their pervasive influence. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to dote on Secretary Pompeo (didn't his namesake village, Pompeii, get covered in lava?) and Pompeo does seem to want to remake the world in similar Trumpian fashion (burn it down), but will the electorate still have an appetite for these fantasies after the Biden/Harris administration convenes? **But back to the present.** Trump is calling obscure functionaries in Michigan wanting their help in reversing that state's election results, and summoning slightly higher officials to the Oval Office. I'm waiting for Trump's various dyes to leak from his temples. But he has a better way with cosmetics than Rudy. **But the Republicans and Democrats** remain at high contrast. Biden doesn't want to sue, he wants to persuade. His old GOP Senate friends! Good luck with that. Doubtless Las Vegas has odds on when Biden/Harris might get a chance to look at the government's secrets. January 21st? Again, I expected no difference from Trump, to cling to his throne as long as possible. Graceful exit is, as they say, not in his vocabulary. Graceful is too long a word to fit. A foreign concept, in any case. **The GSA woman** (Emily Murphy!) is really a trip. For me, at least, one to the past, since GSA (General Services Administration) is the only serious typo in the first edition of my 1972 book, *The Harrisburg 7* and the *New Catholic Left*. I called it Government Services Administration. Stupid me. **The Congress is now on Thanksgiving "recess"**. Who would know? What's the difference? Covid is climbing its most virulent peaks. Warm weather is

leaving the northern states. And one possible “vaccine” has to be kept colder than the moon. It goes without saying that the price of today’s turkeys matches the turkey in the White House. That’s not accurate. The turkey in the White House would get less pennies a pound. He did, though, get 70 million votes. What that says about the country is frightening, even though half that vote is for what remains of the “principles” of the Grand Old Party, and the never hotter hatred for Democrats.

November 24, 2020— #15

Back in the old days, when I was a weekly columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times (2000-2005), I would often write a Thanksgiving or Christmas column, when my 700 word protestations ran on the appropriate day. This blog won’t run on Thanksgiving itself, but close. In some demented gesture to see all that has changed, I will reprint part of a Xmas day column, one that did run on the day itself, before I was detached from the Sun-Times, being one of many harbinger sacrifices that marked so much of journalism during the still on-going era of cutbacks: 12/25/01 *My family (because of my wife’s abundant frequent flyer miles) had planned to spend last Christmas in Israel, experience Christmas eve in Bethlehem, but the second intifada began and we canceled. Maybe next year, we thought. Well, not this year, either. Nor likely the next, or the next. The terrorism recession came early to Israel; last Christmas Bethlehem’s hotels were empty. This year one of them is burnt and gutted, the Paradise Hotel, which is on a road leading to Manger Square in front of the Church of the Nativity, built over the stable where, legend has it, Christ was born. When the Paradise burned in October during a firefight between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen, I found the photograph I had taken of it, when, in ‘97, we had visited Bethlehem, under control of the Palestinian Authority since the ‘93 Oslo accords. Israel’s cities were relatively calm then, though it is wrong to ever call Bethlehem’s close neighbor, Jerusalem, “calm”. Peaceful is less wrong, but still not correct. Quiet, perhaps. Jerusalem strikes many as one of the most exciting cities in the world. It is, though it pays a high price for its excitement. There is a tension there that is always pulsing, either below the surface, or above. And it is most especially intense in the Old City, since it is kept walled up there. **Not quite twenty years ago, that.** What has changed you may ask? My marital status for one. Be that as it may, Benjamin Netanyahu was spoken of back then, at least in my first visit to Jerusalem, as a crook, more or less, around the Clinton administration era. Out of office, to most everyone’s great relief. My how times have changed. Israelis aren’t known to forgive and forget, but Netanyahu seems to be the exception. **Of course, back then, Donald Trump was the longest shot** to become President of the United States. So long, very few—a handful only—ever gave it a thought. But Reagan had smoothed the way for a second TV huckster to become the top dog. Though redundant on my part, I have pointed out the Jekyll and Hyde aspect of this evolution before. No need for the gentleman when you have the beast at the ready. Times change. Netanyahu not so much. **Why am I swimming in the past?** I ask myself. Because The Donald has been so spectacularly odious these past days that I resist chronicling his doings. And, again, because I am suffering the realization that none of this is over. No water colors for Trump, no books to write a la Obama, no grandchildren to dote on as per Hillary, and God Knows What Bill Clinton is actually doing now. Trump still insists on sticking his mug into our daily lives. Lord, he’ll be President for nearly two more months. What outrages are ahead? And the media, the television image-driven side, will help, I’m sure, keep him alive on the variety of screens, large and small. Ratings uber alles. **The thirst for disruption has not abated** for Trump’s disciples. He is his own version of a Pandemic. And I’m not at all sure Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will institute an Operation Warp Speed*

to eradicate this particular virus. Happy Thanksgiving.

December 3, 2020— #16

Given what Amy Coney Barrett's first case to garner attention turned out to be, one could think there was Divine intervention. It was one of those instant—in terms of the court's usual mode—decisions responding to someone's idea of a crisis, such as, how quickly can we make George W. president?—or, in this case, how many of the faithful, mainly Catholics and Jews, can we cram into a church or synagogue or temple, during a pandemic? It seems always to be an End of Days event. **Since the Supreme Court itself** is all Catholics and Jews (though Neil Gorsuch, the snob, became an “Episcopalian” when he reached early adulthood) it seemed like a family affair. Even Gorsuch's decision, letting the-more-the-merrier attend, drips with his classic hoity-toity disdain: “...but it is always fine to pick up another bottle of wine, shop for a new bike, or spend the afternoon exploring your distal points and meridians....” Bret Stephens, in the Times, loved it. He would. **The Chief Justice threw up his hands** and joined the “liberals”, wishing it, the case itself being terribly premature, would just go away. Public health be damned. Anyway, I wonder what Justice Gorsuch would have said about the not-Kool Aid, but cheaper flavored sweetener, suicide-by-religion in Jonestown, Guyana. More the merrier, doubtless. Amy Coney Barrett did her duty to the Lord and fulfilled His Wish for putting her on the Court. She was the deciding vote. If the congregants want to dare potential death, let them. **Again, I might seem obsessed** with the makeup of the Court, all Catholics and Jews. I've been writing about it for years. I just find it peculiar that actual Protestants have so fallen in disfavor. This comes about since ardently religious Protestants tend to be zealots, perhaps not as extreme as ACB, but out there, evangelical-wise. Think of famous Protestants and you get the idea. Who knows? Will President-elect Biden appoint a protestant, if he gets a chance? (I'm talking about you, Clarence. Don't you have better things to do?) Biden, of course, is our second Catholic President-to-be. **Given the early evidence** of Biden's appointments, perhaps we'll get a non-western religionist. Something a bit more exotic for the America First crowd, a stab at stepping free of ecumenicism. We'll see. **We have less than 50 days to go** of the bottom-of-the-barrel presidency of Donald Trump. Some doubt that, but not me. I can't imagine—whatever my powers in this regard—anyone worse. Yesterday's news was the reported likelihood of a Trump 2024 run, to be announced on the same day as Biden is sworn in, another ratings bonanza for someone. Trump's imagination equals or surpasses his IQ: just do the opposite of what the smart people do. He is the unsightly reflection of the sightly. The Mr. Hyde to the Dr. Jekyll. **One of my many objections** to the man is that I, like many, never saw his “hit” TV program the years it ran. I wasn't part of his demographic, the mob that makes up the bulk of his voters. It wasn't a matter of politics, it was a matter of stupid. I avoid stupid. The new developing conventional wisdom is that Biden will be too old to run again in 2024. Maybe. And it does create a sour foreboding that will lurk over the White House for three years, given that The Donald will be the age Biden is now when Biden assumes the office, the Presidency.

December 16, 2020— #17

Well, who expected anything different? The cliché, Hope Springs Eternal, proves itself again. From the time The Donald came down his escalator, he has been a buffoon, just what he always has been, a huckster dying for attention. One still wonders about the

singularity of his elevation to President. I have been writing about this phenomenon—the accidental presidency—for many years, how chance plays such a disproportionate role in our modern (all I'm claiming) history. **I don't want to go through a litany**, but let's start with LBJ. Lee Harvey Oswald, the president maker. Need I say more? I could, but let's carry on. But Trump descending from a Trump Tower escalator, as a metaphor, has no bottom. Down, down, down we go, went. I don't know if debased comes from the de-basement, the cellar, but it appears there is no basement to be found with Trump. How he began is how he ends—though, given that there are more than 30 days left, we most likely haven't gone as low as we can go. **I recall the beginning of his reign**, when there was some faint hope expressed that the presidency would “elevate” his conduct. Ha, ha, ha. One end of Trump the builder is Trump the wrecking ball. Out with the old, in with the new, the new being chaos and destruction. Trying to discern his appeal, I did notice his narrow version of populism. There's always a bit of attraction in that. And never appearing to be smarter than his audience. That accounts for a large share of his horde of followers. And being so dumb that the powers-that-be in the GOP, ensconced in DC, thought, for the most part correctly, that they could do pretty much what the party leaders wanted. **Even the cable media giants are worried** these days about the boring Biden/Harris administration to come. The Donald did manage to create a new outrage a day, which fit with the times, given the 24 hour, short attention-span public of watchers. Though I never watched Trump's “The Apprentice,” I occasionally land on some prime time network television show these days and find myself appalled anew. And the so-called intelligent shows, what few still exist (has anyone noticed the steep decline of “60 Minutes”?) have abandoned all hope and become weird versions of “Dateline,” often hosted by NBC's prime television's news anchor, cheery Lester Holt. **PBS, I suppose, still tries**, but, really? So we have to resort to the growing thirst for documentaries, which show up here and there, series often, rather than one-shots, for information, but here, too, entertainment values dominate. **But back to Trump**. Again, by just being morbidly contrary, he manages to rack up more firsts. The first sitting president of the new era, to damn democracy and libel elections, chanting daily, often hourly, how the whole system, the one the country has used for centuries, is a sham and a fraud. You would think that would upset a few people. But the citizens who seem most upset are Trump's legions, agreeing with him. The Republican establishment thinks all his blandishments are just fine. They are patient parents to the worst of children, thinking he will outgrow, or become exhausted, and eventually abandon his tantrum. January 20th? **Television will still succumb** to The Donald's catnip and, after he exits, it will feature him and his scurrilous antics for the sake of eyeballs and ratings in the parallel universe he already occupies (and helped create), contrasting it with whatever the Biden/Harris administration can mount as competition. Given the demon Mitch McConnell, that won't be much, I'm afraid. **We haven't left crazy time** and, I suppose, once again, it's because of technology over sense, and the lowering of all standards over time. Along with the lowering, is the paradoxical rise in “liberals” censorious control of culture, where, in the last decade or so, neo-neologisms have prospered. Not invented words, but older language that has been newly dressed up. Two examples: “curated” and “cancel”, the new C words. When I began to hear fellow academics use the word curated, or curate, I took an interest in the sociology involved. It was “privileging” the role, not of the creator, but of the already created, those who notice or claim value, not the progenitors. I thought that dangerous. It seemed to be an abandonment, but also an elevation. The cancel culture followed. Those who choose can also not choose, but cancel. I've always been a fan of choosing between good and bad, but this was something different, a corporatization of judgment. Why do I mention, or go on, this tangent? Oh, I suppose it has to do with why

Trump won, when so many educated people didn't vote, or didn't vote for Hillary, voting instead for the ridiculous third- and fourth-party candidates, or, because of the dispatched Bernie, might have cast their lot with the rube Trump as a protest vote. Trump didn't so much win the 2016 election as it was forfeited by those who should have known better. **We have all gone through a terrific four years**, topped off with a Pandemic (without which Trump might actually, probably, have won reelection). And now he, dare I say legitimately, has about half of the country's voters on his side. And absent a post-Xmas Miracle of Georgia the next four years loom ominously. Trouble ahead.

December 31, 2020— #18

When I think of old people—now that I have become one—I recall as a youth the various literary puzzles I was presented with in grammar school. They all pointed out that one goes from being a child all the way to the end of one's life becoming, once again, a child. Shakespeare, Grimm's fairy tales, literature throughout the ages, many things point to this paradox. As the year tumbles to its end, it's clear how politics has aged us all and how those, in positions of power, are in the main terribly old, on both sides of the aisle, capping this ignominious year. **Death from Covid** (like the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Supreme Court) kills off a lot of old folks, with a sprinkle of the young, the middle-aged, here and there. Mitch McConnell, The Donald, the new president-elect, Joe Biden, are all very long in the tooth. Stephen Breyer is the oldest member of the Court at 82, followed by Clarence Thomas at 72. But it has been the method of modern presidents to pick younger justices-to-be, so as to lengthen their stay and influence. RBG, of course, was the oldest, 87, till replaced by the youngest, ACB, 48. **Who is likely to be president in 2025?** Someone middle age? Or aged? I guess we'll see. Now we're in the last gasp of gerontology. Two things, I suppose, have forced these musings. The end of the year and the end of the hideous Trump administration, which, of course, may not yet have done its worst. New Year's is always represented by an infant with a sash (2021!) and the departing year a unisex crone with a cane. Out with the old, in with the new. Well, with Biden/Harris we have a two-fer. The old and the new, combined. It's not yet known whether the Senate will flip, but there's not a lot of confidence expressed on the airways by those in the know, the Democrats, that is. **Trump, of course, never disappoints.** His kind of intelligence, if he has any, is reflective, meaning he does the opposite of what people with sense want. And, given his history, he has some proof of such behavior's efficacy. Never concede. Say you won over and over for weeks on end. Some generous portion of the public will believe it if said often enough, broadcast by one and all, over media, in every form. If an individual says such things to his or her small circle of friends s/he will be a candidate for a rest home, or worse. But have the means to say it to everyone, day in and day out, and it becomes something else. Not madness, but food for thought. What's clear, shown over and over the last four years, is that the responsible folks never wanted to admit how bad things have become, admitting to having a semi-lunatic, or, rather semi-literate know-nothing, as president. Republicans, orchestrated by Mitch McConnell, could do their dark work and it would be worth the embarrassment, especially if the culture had reached the point where the populace no longer could be embarrassed. Speaking of old saws, as I was in the first paragraph, another comes to mind: The Emperor's New Clothes, by Hans Christian Andersen, producing a slogan which devolved to the emperor without clothes. There never was a universal chorus of disapprobation for The Donald, only, especially early on, scattershot shouts of the fabled child's insight: No clothes! No clothes! Republicans had too much to lose. Trump knew he just had to reprise his role

on *The Apprentice*. Often, that task turned out to be too difficult. The Legislative Branch continues to be an embarrassment. The two GOP Georgia Senate candidates, Senators Loeffler and Perdue, are poster children advertising the many representatives of no redeeming social value in the Congress. Given their lack of virtue in any area, except economic, they could be a cat and a dog, merely symbolic Republicans to fill their respective seats. Could they have drudged up more shocking examples of the species, corruptible nobodies filling space? And then there is the new Senator from Missouri, Josh Hawley. Hawley and I share a past. We went to the same high school in Kansas City, MO, though decades apart, an all-boys prep school run by the Jesuits. (Hawley's two winning races were against women, not an insignificant fact.) I got a good education there in the early 60s. Its campus is on the state line, moving there the year I graduated, so across the street is Kansas. I don't think Hawley and I would have been friends. I presume he had friends there, but I'm not sure. Hawley understands the virtue of propinquity. He clerked for John Roberts. He mimicked, in a strange way, Barack Obama's career: as a youth Hawley won an attorney general race in Missouri—which, as usual, was in the midst of governmental scandals all around—served only a year and then ran for the Senate. He realized that it is easier to win in chaos rather than calm and he faced an 11 person primary, but, like Trump, he survived the clown show. (See above remark about women opponents. Note Trump's opponent the year he won.) Biden, too, survived the Democrat primary, but Hawley had it easier. Like the Catholics Trump has appointed to the Supreme Court, Hawley, though not a Catholic, clings to the faith's hottest margins. Well, Biden is a Catholic. Catholics everywhere these days. Now, of course, Hawley has volunteered to get as much publicity as possible, posing as a Trump toady, to object during the Electoral College Senate vote count. See Josh run. Obama jumped quickly from one election to another, the Senate to the Presidency. All of this just points to the fact that we aren't leaving the politics-as-asylum show any time soon. And Trump, for whatever terrible reasons, has abandoned Mar-a-Lago today to return to the White House, forgoing the gaudy New Year's eve party held there. Happy New Year, though the new year won't actually start till January 20th.

January 8, 2021— #19

The rats are abandoning the sinking ship of state. It's a long list, so I won't begin to record them, but newspapers will print their names. As dolts say, the list is long. Well, I'll mention one of the worst, good old Lindsey Graham, the changeling from South Carolina, who is such a collection of unpleasantness I won't catalog that either. Mitch McConnell took it upon himself to lecture the Senate at how un-American Hawley/Cruz's play was and his wife, the Transportation Secretary, that marriage of many conveniences, resigned in lofty and last minute umbrage at the unsightliness of it all (the riffraff marauding in the Capitol, that is.) **Those who are surprised** at the invasion by the lumpen of the seat of government are either naive, unformed, or hapless co-conspirators, expressing surprise, that is, at the violent denouement of the Trump Administration, its first act at least, as it approaches its final flame out. Ah, all that broken glass. It looked like Chicago's Magnificent Mile, or in any number of Wisconsin towns, after the right-wing vandals started smashing windows. There's still time and worse can happen, but the attack on the U.S. Capitol should come as no surprise. What was surprising was the mixed reaction of a minority of the participants as they found themselves wandering around the various sacrosanct chambers, the stunned expressions on their faces. **From the multiple video sources**, digital phones, in-place cameras, a viewer could see an approximation of awe on some, or, at least, wonder, something approaching

amazement, not necessarily feelings that have often overtaken them. I presume those were people who don't frequent many monumental buildings of government. That was the strangest reaction, but those poses quickly faded, and others took over, the kid-in-the-candy-store look, especially from the dozen, or so, who were milling about in the Senate chamber in various patriotic costumes. **I've been saying Trump the Terrible** is terrible from the start and those who thought he was the rabid dog that could be tamed, the useful idiot who could be used, are now quickly backtracking—Republican office holders, especially. A bit late in the game. As the sprite Lindsey offered, quoted by the Boston Globe, “it breaks my heart that my friend, a president of consequence, would allow yesterday to happen.” Ah, yes, a president of consequence. There are all sorts of consequences here. Lindsey's heart, I take it, is, or has been, often broken. **We still have a dirty dozen of days** left wherein more Trump chaos can be generated. The odious GOP Senators, the too long serving and disliked Cruz and the new-be Hawley, need be shunned, but will their voters do so? Even I find it hard to believe that nearly 150 House Republican representatives would vote in the affirmative for the hogwash they were being sold about the Pennsylvania election. Among them was my “representative”, Wacky Jackie Walorski, the Trump sycophant, who knows little and repeats it often. Thanks to the usual tortured gerrymandering in Indiana she keeps her seat. Now that the Hawley/Cruz fiasco is being denounced by some Republicans, the GOP House representatives who went along should be forever branded as seditious lunatics, or worse, but, of course, they won't be. **The only illuminating surprise** in the last few days has been the Democrat Senate sweep in Georgia, Georgia on my mind. I thought maybe one seat (swapping out the skinny appointed gal for a guy) was possible, but to win both races. Hallelujah! **Trump was a laughingstock** when he ran and won the presidency. Now the United States is a laughingstock. Even though some Republicans see what their dark bargain has brought us all, it will not be a rehabilitating tonic. It's been well known for decades that we get the president we deserve and Trump has been no different. The Donald was not so much an aberration as a culmination. I don't know what kind of rabbit Biden/Harris can pull out of their hat, but, thanks again to Georgia, they have at least, best, 24 months to wow us.

January 19, 2021— #20

Well, it's come to this. American Carnage. In the Capitol. The swarm of humanity, often seen in sci-fi horror films, breaching the walls. What was surprising was the ease of the take over, the small resistance of the building's protectors. It stank of planning, cooperation, either foreordained, or incompetence on display. With the Trump Administration it's likely to be a mixture of both. The Donald, to the last minute, continues his “reality” show with aplomb, staging, at public cost, a competing spectacle to the certification of the Electoral College vote, reaping what he has been sowing since the election, that he won in a landslide, his unending delusional cry. **Trump summons the hordes** and then retreats to the White House after sending them to plunder and preen. As ancient as this mob looked, it was as up-to-date as it could be. Half of marauders seemed to be holding pikes and other medieval accouterments, the other half brandishing Smartphones, recording their ne'er do welling, later giving testimonies of their felonious accomplishments. Though I doubt all their intelligence quotients, they all did seem to have an adolescent pride in boasting about what they pulled off, wanting to broadcast as soon as possible. To certify their victory. **Because, now, a day before** the Biden/Harris inauguration, Washington is an armed camp, on lock-down, a demonstration of Trump's prediction and curse, American Carnage. Trump, himself, claims to be on the verge of a formal military sendoff to applaud his last free flight

to Mar-a-Lago, his property that resembles any number of South-of-the-Border dictators' idea of a good time. **I, for one, never watched The Apprentice.** According to reference sources, it premiered in 2004, with Trump the star, and he "helmed" (as the nitwits say) it for fourteen years. Never saw it. I have seen clips, once Trump emerged as the front runner for the Republican nomination. I first wrote about The Donald as a candidate in March of 2016. I wasn't friendly: "Now that Trump's pictorial similarities to Il Duce have been widely noticed, The Donald, our own Herr Mousse-olini, has his followers doing stiff-arm Sieg Heil pledges. It is a little much." This, along with other criticisms, appeared in the columns I did on the campaign for the Huffington Post, and are now reprinted in my book, *Politics and the American Language*, which was published without fanfare, given the circumstances afoot, Covid, etc., in March of 2020. Trump himself was no mystery in 2016, nor now, though he turned out to be worse than even I thought he could be. He outdid himself, thanks to his despicable enablers of the GOP. **And now we await the predicted example** of the autocrat, followed by the certified citizen Melania, his Evita (though seemingly one without any discernable talent), hopping on Air Force One to (almost) leave the country, clinging to a Southern-most margin. Again, Trump leaves Biden/Harris with a paradoxical symbolic setting to start their term, one fit only for television, displaying a military takeover, arranged by The Donald's demented disciples. And middle-Americans were once worried about Hippies! The new right-wing Hippies of 2021 trashed the Capitol. **The lumpen in the U.S.** share a number of similarities. I should know, because I was one in my prolonged youth, especially in hairstyles and wardrobe. Merriam-Webster gives an interesting definition of lumpen: "of or relating to dispossessed and uprooted individuals cut off from the economic and social class with which they might normally be identified." It's almost philosophical. They're strivers of a sort. But it's their sense of dislocation, being untethered, that allows them to flock to an authoritarian (and rich) leader. Trump might be a bogus millionaire, but he struts the look. **The Donald is a guy who wants to be first.** It's an impulse. The first monk to burn himself to death in Viet Nam, the first sniper to kill over a dozen from a high tower in Texas. Anything to be the first. What passes for Trump's intelligence is reactive: to do the opposite of what everyone else has done. To be new. A president boasting continuously that he won the election by hu-u-u-ge amounts, that somehow it was stolen from him, to promote the untruth endlessly. I go back and forth about whether he actually believes this, or that he has just swallowed enough of his own kool aid to be convinced.

It's been a terrible four years, the last one visited with a Biblical plague to top off the Trump reign. And, for all I know, there's enough deluded—the dispossessed and uprooted—no-nothings to presage another season, fit only for TV, of the rolling apocalypse that has been the Trump years. Ready for a Restoration? Imagine the Republican ticket for 2024. It could be worse. A Trump with brains.

February 3, 2021— #21

What has Trump wrought? *But I have spoke / With one that saw him die; who did report / That very frankly he confessed his treasons, / Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth a deep repentance. / Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.* **There is no character in Shakespeare** that mimics The Donald. He doesn't have the brains of Iago, the language of anyone who struts upon the stage. And he, of course, is more than a clown. The bard didn't do, it seems, malignant clowns. (But our modern popular culture seems to love them.) So, the lines from Macbeth don't exactly fit Trump, though there is a kernel of pertinence there. Nothing in his presidency became him like the leaving of it. Two weeks earlier the

mob invaded the Capitol on his behalf, the whole crew wearing disparate costumes, some military, some madcap, some bad-taste-middle-class—sporting feed caps embossed with Make (& Keep) America Great Again, many with patriotic-themed knitted stocking caps, all the usual winter dunce wear—befitting a hodgepodge of various Shakespeare characters tossed about in a Cuisinart. Another white-tribe mob in full fury. An appropriate capstone indeed. **After the Capitol riot** a silence fell on the presidency, since Trump was deprived of, banned from, Twitter, his primary public voice. The voice he used in private, typing away with his short stubby digits, surrounded by fast food wrappers, whatever leavings that get picked up by White House servants. Trump, himself, during the second candidate debate in 2016, described a guy—an unwitting prophesy on The Donald’s part—“sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds,” as a likely candidate interfering with the election, other than the Russians. The beginning turned into the end. His other, secondary, voice, after Twitter, was that of important personage on the way to the helicopter, disclaiming to the sad minions of the press shouting questions. **All this silence was**, is, as they say, deafening. Some technically imposed, some self-imposed, Trump revealed what was below the surface during his reign. That he had no public voice to serve him at length. Speeches needed to be written for him. The only form he could manage on his own was rally speak and he never desisted from rallies during his entire presidency. So his post Twitter silence echoes on. Curiously, the only protocol of former presidents he has followed is this after-departure silence. **The Democrats can’t let go**, though, giving him the benefit of a second impeachment, another first he can brag about. The Republicans still advertise themselves as the worst people in the world and the GOP will never recover, unless, of course, they win both houses of Congress in 2022 and run the government once again. Everything is moving as fast as the Covid virus, except for the immunizing of citizens. **It is impossible to remember** The Donald’s initial victory without contemplating Hillary’s loss. What a price to pay for her defeat. My problem remains with all the folk who normally would have voted for the Democrat, but couldn’t bring themselves to pull the lever for Hillary. The gamut ran from hatred to boredom, from outrage to ennui. All those ersatz nonvoters had their reasons. So too the ludicrous Third Party candidates. Yes, there were reasons. But all those semi-informed individuals should have had some knowledge of who The Donald was. We all have paid a terrible price for their delicate feelings. Their Hillary-that-bitch disdain. **Again, the shock this time** around was how popular a complete imbecile can become. Trump has no redeeming social value, but nearly half the country voted for him in 2020. The country has become use to occasional nitwits being elected to the House, but now they are more lethal than ignorant. And though the Biden/Harris administration is barely two weeks old, the Trump virus still spreads, reinfesting those who, one thought, might back off a bit. No no no. There’s no undoing, it seems, the Republicans’ disastrous pact with the Devil. **Mitch McConnell still acts** as if he is the majority leader and “Chuck” Schumer can’t seem to fully displace him. Democrats fight each other with more relish than they confront the Republican opposition. The same old same old. There is something dispiriting about all the photographs showing Biden sitting at the desk, mask-less, and Harris standing in the corner wearing hers, as if she is at his beck and call, the usual lady in waiting. **The new administration** is in the position of going from too little to too much. But all the antagonisms remain the same. Trump silenced—no Twitter no Trump—is the only thing that seems to be permanently positive. Trump truly was the president without any clothes. But television couldn’t point that out since they had made him a star. A star to whatever percentage of the deluded had watched—and enjoyed—The Apprentice. The profitable media couldn’t and didn’t want to admit that the people had elected a complete idiot President. The last couple of months of his reign some of the press

did curtail their self imposed ignorance, meaning they began to point out the depths of his know-nothing-ism. Though the I-Won mantra continued to be aired day after day, hour after hour on most every platform. It is still likely that without the plague year The Donald would have been reelected. That's another appalling truth this country doesn't like, or want, to face.

February 26, 2021— #22

The Donald, live and in person, has been absent from the tube till now. It's rumored he is to appear on Sunday at CPAC, the Republican organization, not to be confused with the CPAP breathing device for sleep apnea, though both items are fused in my mind, given the GOP's predilections for wearing weird outfits, all suspicious. Trump's image hasn't gone away, thanks to the news hounds of media that can't let him go, and with the help of the slice of Democrats that share the same jones. We Need Our Trump! I don't need him, but the damage he has done to the republic will live on longer than he, unless he has the life-span genes of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. **After Congress impeached Trump** again and the Senate, post inauguration, acquitted him once again, and after the January 6th attack on the Capitol has been replayed by various committees, using, largely, the same smart phone videos replayed over and over, the air time Trump shares with President Biden (who Andrea Mitchell and other commentators keep calling Vice President Biden) is about 50-50 thus far. **Though redundant—much of the Trump years were duplicates of outrages**—the climax was the temporary take down of the Capitol. What a way to end! A TV movie at its worst. But, all of culture has gotten worse, and that trend, unfortunately, did not begin with the Trump Administration. He was the effect, not the cause. None of his Republican enablers ever took his loathsome blabber seriously. He was the fool they would humor as long as he let them do what they wanted. They would tolerate the buffoon, never thinking he could actually unleash the intolerable. But he did so on January 6th. **If you ask me, which you haven't**, I would ascribe it to the triumph of the resurrected oral culture, new version, Oral Culture 2. I've written about this language topic before, but the violent culmination was Trump's assembling of the mob—mobs tend to be the epitome of the oral culture. Note the Sermon on the Mount—and then he dispatched the aroused to the Capitol, armed with cudgels, poles and pikes, all Medieval oral culture weapons of war. **Alas, I'm not sure that is going to be the last gasp of the new oral culture** taking over what passes for culture here at home. People still read, obviously, but it is no longer the wind in the sails of the culture. If I extend this out to the world at large I could quickly become—because of the handy examples I might use—a likely target for all the political correctness and language police on duty. I will admit I favor the literate culture, evidently a passing phenomenon of history, existing from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg, from the printing press to the internet, and its spawn, facebook, twitter, etc, being among the leading transformers. Those practitioners, wealthy as they are, did not invent the internet, they just knew how to exploit it. See John D. Rockefeller. **So much woe to contemplate** and people continue to drop like flies from Covid-19, also, unfortunately, a large part of the oral culture, letting people breathe together. Pandemics, too, are practically Medieval, flourishing, as they did, in the oral culture world. Perhaps this sort of disease is the apotheosis of the present era. Science, though, is getting a lot of play—at least some—these days and it is fairly literate, though its language is mainly numbers, equations, amounts, chemistry, etc., not Shakespeare, or seeming to favor those who aspire to the written word. **On the bright side, so to speak**, more mechanical spiders have been sent to outer space, one to land on Mars recently. Terrific! It all begins, it seems, with a countdown. 10-9-8-etc. Counting came before language, but language did catch up,

at least to a decade or two ago. Talk, as they used to say, is cheap, but no longer. Podcasts rule, belatedly climbing out of their ancient dens. As Trump proved, it is the oral culture that allows for the Big Lie. Just say it over and over. Proof would have to be found on the page, documented, to be checked and read. Proof, not always, but often, is set in type. **Speaking, as I was above, of counting,** Biden is the oldest president. When Reagan left the presidency (after two terms!), he was addled with Alzheimer's at age 77. (Though I don't blame his final impairment for all his follies, but the stuff he was spouting long before he even became governor of California was borderline nitwittery.) Biden is 78. Numbers, numbers. I'm 75, so if I'm an ageist, it's the self-criticizing kind. We have a bit less than 23 months before things will get worse. And they're pretty bad now. But the less I see of Trump the better for the precious months ahead. That would be the ticket. Or, at least, my ticket to ride, as the Beatles once sang.

[The Donald left the presidency on January 20, 2021, in the same manner he began his campaign—by descending. No depth was too low for Trump. Down, down, down. Slinking off to the airport mid-morning for a send-off there surrounded by his awful family and a garish mixture of employed sycophants and clapping fans. The end was as tawdry as the beginning. The mob rampage of the Capitol had, at least, dampened Trump's dreams of a glorious departure. But the media still longs for the gaudy and The Donald's dangling lure hasn't been entirely ignored. Biden is far from gaudy, not that at all, so the world of the White House recedes from the public's consciousness. We should all expect the usual criminality, catastrophes and calamities to get more attention and press in the days to come—at least till the next election cycle. As I've said more than once, God help us all.]