

Madison foursquare

Valentine

52



It's beginning to look a lot like Valentine's Day!



Scott captions this: "A pleasant stroll around the Capitol." Jeanne's caption: "Polar vortex fashion."



This issue of *Madison Foursquare* is brought to you by Scott Custis and Jeanne Gomoll, who live at 2825 Union Street, Madison, WI 53704.

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What's New

[SC] Update on my piece in December, Covid in the Family. The news is all good. My sister-in-law Donna made a full recovery in-so-far as Covid 19 goes. She was transferred to a rehab facility from the hospital in early December and was finally released home on January 21. She has had both her vaccine shots. The damage from the strokes she suffered has been largely mitigated with the concentrated therapy she got in the rehab center. She is doing well today, if a bit weaker. Everyone else has completely recovered and we have managed not to acquire any new cases in my family. However, the new variants are out and spreading across America. All of us need to get vaccinated or mask up and keep our heads down now more than ever.

[JG] Have you heard of "Room Rater"? Room Rater is the joint Twitter handle for two people who began amusing one another by giving scores to the backgrounds of talking heads on TV news shows—rating lighting, bookshelves, plants, artwork, room depth, with extra points awarded for unique items. They are likely Wisconsin natives (they're Packer fans and commented on a Memorial Union chair); they do not hide their lefty-leanings. Their ratings went viral and now commentators adjust their camera angles and take Room Rater advice to feature more interesting backgrounds. Room Rater has become a force for good, or at least for more aesthetically pleasing TV backgrounds. I, for one, will miss the views of commentators' homes when they return to TV studios and network logos, post-pandemic..)

Comments

Walter Freitag

[SC] I wish you well with your cold showers. I doubt I will be experimenting with them myself as I am pretty fond of warm showers. The only time I stray from that is when I work out in the summer and I'm sweating profusely, then I will opt for a cool shower. I have always been bemused by folks who do the sweat lodge or sauna thing and then run outside and plunge into a cold lake. Not me. At my age the presumed health

benefits are not enough of a draw. I'm pleased they make you feel so good afterwards. I think I will look for pleasure elsewhere.

[JG] I know the feeling, Walter, and in contrast to my heat-loving partner, I've always enjoyed plunging into and swimming in cold, sometimes extremely cold water. I remember one night when we were camping on Rock Island (in Lake Michigan, off the tip of Door County), I went skinny dipping in the lake. We'd already spent several days in the wilderness, with no showers available and I was eager to wash



off bug spray and sweat from the day. Lake Michigan water off Wisconsin's coast is usually very cold—something about the prevailing westerly winds which suck colder water from the depths. In our camping days, Scott generally avoided going further than knee-deep and after a few days began to campaign for a move to a hotel with modern plumbing. But the night I went skinny dipping in the lake, the beach was deserted; there were probably less than a half dozen people on the island, and it was so dark that the milky way was clearly visible. I plunged in, as usual to get the shock of the cold temperature out of the way, and then floated nude in the waves for a half hour or so, gazing up at the night sky. That's one of my favorite, happiest memories of camping on Rock Island. [The picture above (not me) captures my feeling.]

Georgie Schnobrich

[SC] I just love your character illustrations. I have always loved your art, thanks for sharing with us. Your story outline is very promising, too. All you have to do is write it. Remind me why you don't have a line of book publishers at your door asking you to illustrate their books?

Regarding your comment to us on coffee, I liked your comment, "To me it tastes like boiled burned bean sludge." Although I am a big fan of coffee, I own a coffee cup that I prominently displayed in my office for the amusement of my (now) late coworker and

friend, Teresa, who hated coffee. The coffee cup, enlivened with a few period-era illustrations, is a collection of quotes from

"The WOMEN'S PETITION AGAINST COFFEE. Representing to Pubic Consideration the Grand INCONVENIENCES accruing to their SEX from the Excessive Use of the Drying, Enfeebling LIQUOR. Presented to the Right Honorable the Keepers of the Liberty of VENUS. London. Printed 1674."

Quotes:

"COFFEE leads men to trifle away their time, scald their Chops, and spend their MONEY, all for a little base, black, thick, nasty, bitter, stinking, nauseous PUDDLE-WATER."

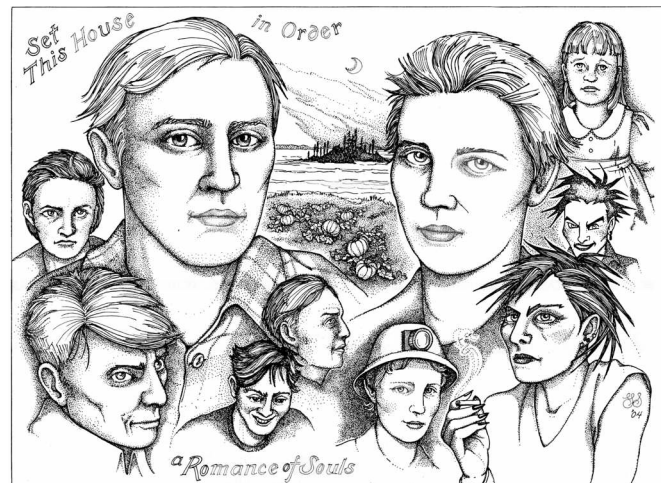
"COFFEE renders them that use it as LEAN as Famine, as Rivvel'd as ENVY, or an old meager Hagg over-ridden by an INCUBUS."

"Some of our SOTS pretend tipling of this boiled Soot cures them of being DRUNK; but we have reason rather to conclude it MAKES them so, because we find them not able to stand after it."

"We Humbly Pray, that henceforth the Drinking of COFFEE may on severe penalties be forbidden to all Persons under the Age of Threescore."

"EXCESSIVE USE of that NEWFANGLED, ABOMINABLE, HEATHENISH liquor called COFFEE, which riffling nature of her choicest treasures and drying up the radical moisture, has ENUCHT our HUSBANDS and CRIPPLED our more kind GALLANTS."

[JG] One of my favorite pieces by you is the illustration you did for the Tiptree Award, which was given to Matt Ruff in honor of his winning the Award for his novel, *Set This House In Order: A Romance of Souls*. [below] For anyone who hasn't read this excellent novel, the main character, Andrew, has multiple personality disorder. The images in Georgie's drawing each represent a different personality.



Gorgeous drawings, Georgie. I especially admire the characters' personality-defining eyes!

Re: Canadians. I've become a fan of Canada humorist, Stewart Reynolds, better known as Brittlestar. You can find some of his videos on his Facebook page (under the name Brittlestar). Do any of you Canadaphiles know about him? I love his low key, sly, compassionate and really intelligent manner. This video is the one that hooked me: it was posted right after our election and portrays the relationship between Canada and the US as two neighbors living in a suburban neighborhood. Here's an ensmallled URL:

tiny.cc/Brittlestar

Suzu McKee Charnas tells the story of some of her extended visits to Italy, where she stayed for several months at a time during the Vietnam era. Many natives assumed by her manner and attitudes that she was Canadian and she always interpreted that as a big compliment.

Re your comment to **Steven V**, Excellent simile of personal trauma as black mold!

Greg Rihn

[SC] As I write this it's one month to the day since the riot at the Capitol and I don't think I have much to add to what has already been ably written about the event by you and a host of other outraged writers. The thing that strikes me from the current perspective is how much about the riot we have been gradually finding more about since then, such as how much the Trump White House was directly involved in planning the gathering up to and including coming up with the idea of the march to the Capitol building. It's one extended scandal that I don't think we have seen the bottom of yet. I'm trying to sit patiently and wait for Biden's new AG (Merrick Garland?) to finally get confirmed so we will know if the Biden Administration intends to move to hold the Trump Administration accountable at the Federal level, or try to sweep it all under the rug in favor of "unity" and the need to press ahead with Biden's policy agenda.

We have also begun watching *All Creatures Great and Small* and enjoying it. We have not seen the original series, but many years ago I read at least one of James Harriot's books.

I enjoyed the transatlantic tea storm story and the M. Wuerker cartoon, thanks.

[JG] I have sometimes shared your opinion that the world will not survive its slide toward autocracy, all the while paying far too little attention to the slow-motion environmental catastrophe enveloping us. I used to think it would be so sad to die and not know "what happens next," in my mind anticipating all sorts of cool, stfnal advancements, but recently, not so much. On the other hand, I can't help but feel that we all need to keep acting and working toward a better future, assuming all along that we will find a path that detours apocalypse.

My family would certainly have shared the game players' outrage about the idea that pie might go stale in the Buckley cartoon. A single pie rarely survived the day in which it came out of the oven when I was young. Family members who were too full to eat "seconds," (let's not even consider the possibility of declining a first slice), sometimes attempted to hide their uneaten dessert in the refrigerator by covering or camouflaging it. I remember one container innocently marked "left-over broccoli." But such obfuscation rarely worked. My father championed the rule that a piece of pie left unclaimed for more than two hours was fair game. Some mornings were pierced by the disappointed *Cri de Coeur* of a brother who had been planning on eating pie for breakfast, only to discover that my father had claimed it as a midnight snack. One of the amazing things about Scott that sometimes causes my brothers to give him the side-eye: Scott is willing to eat one slice of pie as a dessert, once a day, and does not raid the refrigerator in between meals for pie snacks. This means that my pies last us four days, which I hasten to point out is STILL not long enough to cause it to go stale.

Lisa Freitag

[SC] With the end of biking season, Jeanne suggested to me to try cross country skiing. I have not taken her up on it this year, but I keep thinking about it. I did it once and liked it a lot better than downhill skiing. And it would be an outside winter exercise option that strikes me as a sensible alternative to biking. I would like to start with a class to get better acquainted with the sport than I currently am (a class is not going to happen in this year of plague, maybe next year). Your fine recounting of skiing adventures helped to tempt me a bit more.

It was hard to read your amusing piece on Twitch without rolling my eyes and thinking the usual grumpy old-man thoughts about Millennials and Gen.

Z. I cannot image being in a place where watching someone else play games would somehow end up being my choice of activity over reading the hundreds of books I haven't read or watching the dozens of movies, shows or podcasts I've always wanted to see. But you wisely explained that it can be comforting to those people who either don't like to be, or aren't used to being, alone a lot. In these plague times, I can understand that.

[JG] I didn't know the publishing history of *Wakula Springs*. Interesting, thanks. I heard Ellen Klages talk about how much fun she had writing the story with Andy Duncan and was intrigued by what she said about the kind of research she needed to do. I urge you to read it! It definitely should *not* be categorized as a horror story. I didn't read a paper copy; I downloaded the Kindle edition.

Elizabeth Matson

[SC] So glad you had a nice break at home for the holidays and I liked your continuing Tea Journey, as well as the great tea discussion you inspired in the apa. I enjoyed your book reviews again, too. In January I read Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize winner *The Underground Railroad*. Jeanne had read it in the fall and recommended it to me. It's not a particularly long book, but it took me all month to finish it. Partly because I was distracted by January being a busy month for news. Partly because it was a beautifully written but very grim story, both physically and psychologically, of slavery and the struggle to reach freedom. I recommend it, but maybe not while the U.S. Capitol is being ransacked by crazy people in the real world.

Message to Nick regarding Reindeer Nick photo, Nick! What has she done to you now, buddy?! Poor boy! Oh well, Christmas is over and you've probably already forgotten the whole thing.

Thank you for your comments on my family's struggle with the plague. I will give an update in our zine this month. Our relationship with our contractor is such that I can easily imagine testing his interest in building a platform for a yurt, just to see his reaction. I know he's been involved in weirder projects.

[JG] ...and maybe Rick (our contractor) might know someone in the Plymouth area to recommend.

I'm really sorry we missed hearing you and the other women of light and dark tell stories via zoom! I

registered for the event using Eventbrite and was told that I would receive a URL and passcode to use to join the zoom production, but I never got one.

Jim Hudson and Diane Martin

[SC] Nice hodgepodge of photos with your lovely annual letter.

Winter certainly has gotten worse, as you predicted. As I sit here today at 3 pm, it's sunny and the temperature outside has finally climbed up to zero, briefly. We have a pretty thick blanket of hard snow on the ground and it looks like we will be lucky to hit 10 degrees F. as a high anytime in the next week. Yes, winter has arrived. Meanwhile the latest Covid headline is that the British variant has broken out widely in Florida and may be the dominant strain across the country by the end of March. Vaccines now please!

I think a movie we've recently enjoyed that I think you'd like is *The Dig* with Carey Mulligan and Ralph Fiennes about the important excavation of an ancient burial grounds in 1939 Suffolk. There are no car chases, shootouts or explosions, but I liked it anyway because British period dramas full of class politics, dry wit, barely controlled tempers and stiff upper lips somehow tend to pull me in.

[JG] You have already watched the Forward Theater zoomed production of *The Niceties* and mentioned in an email to me that you didn't like it and in fact didn't watch to the end. As I mentioned in the last zoomed apa collation party, I hated the production. Nevertheless Scott and I watched the whole thing. Scott would have been willing to turn it off earlier, but I was curious in a sort of horrified way, wondering if my feelings would change. Not so much; in fact I got more angry during the second act. I didn't think the tech was particularly successful and it really bothered me to see Sarah Day reading her lines from papers on her desk, but the main thing that I hated was the plot and characters. I can feel myself getting worked up here. I don't think I can describe the story in an unbiased way, separate from my opinions. I need to stop. We should talk about it someday.

Marilyn Holt

[SC] Your book cover is very cool. Good luck with your continued progress toward publication. We watched the inauguration on MSMBC and agree that it was a very pleasant and gratifying experience. And, as if

Providence was watching over it all, it was a strikingly beautiful (if chilly in D.C.) day for the events!

[JG] I love the cover! Very dramatic, nice design. Who is the artist?

Carrie Root

[SC] I was thinking of you a couple weeks ago when I was out on a walk and I came by a little free library so I scanned through the titles. Lo and behold, there was a copy of Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven*. I like Jane Smiley, so I grabbed it. The book will be a little pleasure I can look forward to in the spring when I've caught up with my winter reading priorities. Later I felt a little weird just snatching it, so I went back and dropped off two novels we finished that we decided not to keep. On my next trip by I noticed they have since disappeared, hopefully to someone who will appreciate them more than we did. That whole transaction was unexpectedly satisfying.

[JG] Rats dropping out of the ceiling! What a horrifying mental image! I'm so glad you mentioned the infestation in the past tense! Yow.

Andy Hooper

[SC] Thank you for the thoughtful review of *Recursion*. I felt much the same way about the experience of reading the book, but your analysis was very interesting and you included information about author Crouch's work and career that I did not know. Jeanne has since read *Dark Matter* and it's now very high up on my to-read list. I hope you and **Carrie** are enjoying the book group, it's been great fun having you both join us.

Regarding your comments to **Jim** and **Diane** and **Jeannie Bergmann** about Orson Welles, I recently came across a 2013 Isthmus article on Welles' time in Madison by Stu Levitan. Apparently Welles claimed he left Madison after he was approached for sexual favors by the Camp Indianola director and fled out a back window and took a train home to his guardian in Chicago. Lowell Frautschi, who shared a room with Welles at the camp, claimed that story was nonsense. Interesting piece.

Sort of on the same subject, Jeanne and I just watched the excellent film *Mank*, which tells the story of Herman Mankiewicz writing the script for *Citizen Kane* in a mere 60 days while recovering from an auto accident. The movie includes many flashbacks to

Mankiewicz's earlier experiences which brings a lot of issues into the film that Mank drew on for inspiration for his script. I thought the movie was terrific, including the brief but impressive appearance of Tom Burke as Welles.

Thanks also for the fine piece on Horror Host Bill Camfield. What an impressive career coupled with such a sad life. I was similarly engaged by the career of Harry Warner who kept his fannish life and his professional life so carefully segregated. All great stuff.

[JG] Excellent review of *Recursion*, Andy. Thanks for including it in your zine. I've also been thinking about *Recursion* since reading another of Blake Crouch's novel, *Dark Matter*.

I've been a fan of time travel stories since reading Heinlein's "—All You Zombies—" a very long time ago. It's interesting to think about the THING that authors of time travel stories task their characters to change. There are, of course, the stories in which characters attempt to kill Hitler or stop JFK's assassination. And then there are the stories in which the characters attempt to change something in their own personal lives—to prevent a tragedy experienced by a loved one or to undo a mistake made in their youth. I think this latter form more closely echoes the reason why time travel fiction fascinates so many of us: there are things in all of our past lives that we would change if it were possible. The time travel stories that involve historical/cultural changes are mostly interesting, I think, as exercises in alternate history, and that's fun too, of course. Both Crouch's novels, *Recursion* and *Dark Matter*, however, focus on individuals re-jiggering time or reality in order to re-visit choices and build lives that might have resulted from better choices. I also include Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Stephen King's *11/22/63*, and Ken Grimwood's *Replay* in this category. And others. But that's enough for now. The central emotional cores of all these novels are love stories. And the time travel device employed in these stories are all of the unorthodox variety that you noted: dependent on the traveler's mind rather than a machine with levers and digital calendar/clocks.

It turns out that Jason Dessen, the protagonist of *Dark Matter*, made such a good decision as a young man by marrying the love of his life and choosing to raise a child with his wife, even though it threw his career off track—that other Jasons from alternate realities envy him. Jason2 (from an alternate reality) discovers a method to jump into alternate realities, and attempts to replace Jason1. It gets much more complicated as more and more Jasons from other realities compete to

replace Jason), but the heart of this story is the love story, the protagonist's central, emotional choice.

Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* is a heart-breaking love story about a man who frequently becomes unstuck in time and shuttles back and forth into his past and future. He knows pretty much from the start when he will die and that he and his wife will have a limited amount of time together. I thought it was a beautifully written novel; I was less happy with the movie, which attempted to unwind the time jumps and rearrange them into a more linear telling.

King's novel, *11/22/63*, begins with the familiar trope of a plan to stop JFK's assassination, but gradually shifts its attention to the emotional core of the story, the love story between the protagonist and Sadie, the woman he meets in 1960s Texas. I think this novel has the best ending of any of King's stories.

Grimwood's *Replay* is more than a love story; it does a really excellent job of investigating how this particular flavor of time travel works in ways that satisfied my science fictional curiosity, but at its core there are two love stories. In the course of thousands of replays, Jeff Winston finds happiness in the marriage that failed in his original life. (That's the first love story.) When I think of *Replay*, I put myself into the moment Jeff experiences, in the first of his replayed lives, when he attempts to replay meeting his wife. But he is a different person than he was when he first met her, in his first life. Having lived a whole life, he can't help but approach her in a different way, and she hardly shows interest in this person. I think about the afternoon I met Scott and wonder how fragile and impossible to duplicate were the circumstances of our meeting. In addition to the many replayed lives Jeff spends with his wife, getting it right, he spends a huge number of lives with Pamela Phillips, a fellow replayer, and that's the second love story.

Crouch switched up this trope in *Recursion*. In his original life, Barry's daughter was killed in a car accident, and his marriage crumbled soon afterward, but that sequence of events becomes a dead-end story, because after re-doing that episode (saving his daughter, working on his marriage), Barry learns that his marriage had always been doomed. Its end was only quickened by the daughter's death. In addition, his daughter killed herself, despite her second chance at life, which allows Crouch to let Barry move on to a new love, the woman he relives hundreds of lives with (much like Jeff and Pamela's romance in *Replay*). Thinking about it this way, the novel is even more manipulative than I thought at the time. Nevertheless,

I did like it. Well, I can usually find something to like about most time travel stories.



I apologize for not including a date in my Savidusky Fur story. Originally I had intended to place this reprinted story, short as it was, under the heading, "From the Vault," at the end of our apazine. The story was originally published as a chapter in my book, *The Tiptree Quilt Story*, ©2015. But I rescued the quilt a couple years earlier than that—during the winter of 2013—so you are quite justified to have been surprised that Savidusky's might have survived to the present day. I moved the story into a mailing comment because it seemed linked to my comment about fur coats, but then I forgot to include the publication information. Oops. In answer to your question: the quilt was accepted by the University of Oregon-Eugene in 2015 and was displayed at the 2015 Tiptree Symposium. It is available for viewing in the Knight Library, which contains the papers of many important women in the SF field, including Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree, Jr., not to mention Le Guin, Gearhart, Wilhelm, Russ, Elgin, Elliot, Marks, Salmonson, Gloss, and others.

That Harry Warner, Jr. lived two different lives, both largely unknown to people he knew in the other, reminds me of Alice Sheldon and how completely her life as an SF writer was compartmentalized, separated from her family, non-SF friends, and professional colleagues.

Steven Vincent Johnson

[SC] Good news that you and Darlene are eligible for the vaccine when available. I'm hoping Jeanne can get the shot(s) soon but since I am a just a callow youth of 64, I probably won't be in line for the vaccine until at least May when I turn 65. I'll have to keep a low profile until then.

[JG] Since Scott wrote that comment a couple days ago, I received a message from Group Health Coop inviting me to set up an appointment for my first vaccine. I was pleasantly impressed by the online sign-up interface and process. By the time this apa is distributed I will have received injection #1. Scott, who is short just a few months of the magic age of 65 years will have to wait a while longer.

Darlene P. Coltrain

[SC] So good to hear from you again, Darlene!

[JG] I know what you mean about feeling less creative during the shut-down. I felt incredibly energized and was quite productive throughout the first six months of the pandemic, but I've steadily produced less and less since then. I'm reading a lot, seeing interesting streaming shows, walking regularly with Scott, and sleeping just fine, but other than a fair amount of creative cooking and baking, this apazine has been my main artistic outlet of the past few months. I am determined to start putting in a regular amount of time each day on a few projects that are stalled at the moment.

J.J. Brutsman and Tom Havighurst

[SC] I hope you are feeling better by now, J.J. Luscious food with photos piece, thanks. I also liked the State Street photos, Tom. It's sad to walk around the Capitol, look down State Street and see that it's practically a ghost town even on weekdays. There is much talk going around town now about making the final push to close the street and make it a pedestrian mall. Madison Metro has suggested reducing bus traffic on State by 30%, but I think people want it all gone and the street limited to people and café seating. I don't know how I feel about this. I was always against it as a daily bus commuter, but maybe it's time. The old State Street is going away anyway, now that Room of One's Own is leaving, Community Pharmacy will have to move somewhere, too, and more new buildings are going up. Bars, restaurants and coffee shops are about all that can make it there anymore, might as well turn it into a big drunken, over-caffeinated food court.

[JG] Mouth-watering food photos and recipes...Thanks JJ! I think I will try your chicken and ham pot pie. Sounds scrumptious. I've started making my pot pies in separate, ceramic cereal bowls. We both like being able to break through the crust of our own, separate pot pie.

Have you received the vaccine yet? We read the article you posted on Facebook about the possibility that the COVID virus might be doing some fancy mutating in the bodies of immuno-suppressed people. Scary.

Great photos, Tom. I understand that the Wisconsin State Historical Society has photographed images painted on the boarded-up Madison windows. Should make an interesting book someday.

Cathy Gilligan

[SC] Regarding your comment to me, "why Kill strip?" It's apparently a California expression. It's

probably a clue to something about California that I'd rather not know about.

[JG] My theory of the "kill strip" is that many people make ambitious planting plans for the strip of ground between road and sidewalk—flowers, vegies, whatever—that inevitably suffer from the attentions of dogs, not to mention passengers exiting cars and trampling plants, or the many other indignities inflicted on this semi-public gardening area. I picture a discouraged gardener sadly regarding the mostly dead plants in their little space and cursing to herself, "May as well call it a kill strip."

So now you have sidewalks, hmm? I'm assuming that one of the main reasons they were installed was to provide access to the wheelchair bound (or otherwise limited). Scott and I are very curious about how decisions are made as to which neighborhoods get sidewalks and which do not. What do you remember from the planning meeting?

Hope Kiefer and Karl Hailman

[SC] A travel story, thanks Karl, nicely done. Driving many hours through the rain is time dismally spent. It's good that you all made it okay and got to enjoy some good food and sights even if the weather was not great. Sometimes travel is a little disappointing but still worth it. I really liked the Creature from the Black Lagoon in a tux picture.

[JG] I hope to visit Wakula Springs someday. If it's allowed, I'd like to swim in that crystal clear water that Ellen Klages and Andy Duncan described in their story. I'd love to know what you think of the story when you read it. As I mentioned to [Lisa](#), it's available on Kindle.

Jeannie Bergmann

[SC] Regarding your comment to [Clifford](#) and [Marilyn](#) about the rebound of the economy after the plague, I agree with you. Even factoring in the job losses and the tough times people are going through, I think it will feel a bit like an explosion once people feel safe to come out and play again. I sometimes wonder what Jeanne and I are going to do first, and whether we will even be able to find a vacant table in a restaurant, seat in the bar or an available hotel room if we elect to hit the road. *Hella Big* was my favorite of your eclectic collection of pieces this month.

[JG] I liked "Blue Heaven" for its cascade of stfnal extrapolations. There's a novel in that poem. And I'm

fascinated by the phrases listed in “The Reach”—all seem to be potential plot devices to provide inflection points in a fantastic tales. Each phrase suggests its own story.

Catie Pfeifer

[SC] Oh how I miss apartment life (insert big eye-roll here.) It’s not all bad. Somebody else cuts the grass and shovels the snow and if you get tired of the view or the neighborhood you can just pack up and move. But getting stuff fixed is nearly always a hassle and something like what you went through amounts to a classic renter’s horror story. Does the landlord have any plan to compensate you fairly for this inconvenience? I mean with the pandemic going on they really put a huge burden on you while leaving you with few safe options.

[JG] If I were you, I would read over my lease agreement carefully and contact the Tenant Resource Center. It seems to me that since your landlord is making part of your apartment unlivable and (temporarily) taking control of part of the space for which you are paying rent, as detailed in your lease, that they should pay a significant penalty—certainly they should bear responsibility for moving and storing items from the space they are asking you to vacate, as well as pay any excess heating bills that you might incur that result from those holes drilled into your ceiling. But they should also be required to rebate part of your rent during the time in which part of your apartment is inaccessible to you. They might even be required to pay for a hotel stay while the construction work is done. The idea that your landlord is doing this to you in the midst of the pandemic is especially alarming. All this might all be in your rear view mirror by now, the work done, etc., but I think you should still demand recompense.

Tenant Resource Center:
<https://www.tenantresourcecenter.org>

And...

Work on our bathroom renovation project starts in just a few weeks, and I’ve been remembering some of our first home renovartion projects, some of them more stressful than others. This month’s story from the vault tells one of the more stressful stories. Sadly I failed to keep track of where this story was originally published.

From the Vault

The Carpet Bidders

by Jeanne Gomoll, 1991

Scott and I bought and moved into our house on Union Street in March of 1989, and we immediately, (optimistically, naively) jotted down a list of things to do in and around our house during the next year. But we soon discovered that everything took more time and cost more money than we expected. After a year had passed which saw just two items completed, we embarked on the living room and dining room project.

The previous owners of our house liked yellow. EVERYTHING was painted yellow. We gleefully ripped out the yellow wall-to-wall shag carpeting and then repainted the yellow walls, window, door, and banister moldings. It was a busy two weeks. It took longer than we thought it would take, which we were coming to understand would always be the case. But when it was finally done, and the floor guys we hired had sanded, stained and polyurethaned the wood floors, we had two gorgeous rooms. We stood around a lot, hands in our pockets, proudly smiling down at the buttery glow of the floors, enjoying the dramatic transformation wrought by three weeks’ hard work. But then we sighed and told one another, “Well, ‘part one’ is done.” “Part two” entailed buying an area rug for the living room.

We live in the Midwest, you see, and although NaturalWoodFloors may indeed be the name of Madison’s most popular unorganized religion, winter forces us to moderate our enthusiasm for naked wood floors. You need some insulation between your feet and the floor when the temperature dips below 0° F and stays there for weeks at a time. So we began our search for a largish area rug, perhaps 10’ x 12’ or so. We thought we might like an oriental rug or possibly something more contemporary. Our minds weren’t made up; we figured we would have plenty of choices. But once again, we discovered that we’d underestimated how long it would take to find something we liked, and how much it would cost.

We looked through all the area rugs hung in all the floor covering stores in Madison. We planned several trips to Milwaukee. We got lost in a “Super Mall,” and began searching through the Chicago yellow pages. We discovered that we were pickier and way more poor than we thought, and the search for the right rug began to take longer than we had thought it would

take. Then, one day, my mom called and asked if Scott and I were still looking for an oriental rug.

“There’s going to be a bankruptcy auction at the Marriott near our house this Sunday. The newspaper ad says they have oriental rugs,” mom explained.

“Bankruptcy sale?” I envisioned little old ladies sobbing as yuppies took away precious home furnishings that had been in the little old ladies families’ for three generations. “Gee, I don’t know...”

Mom explained that they were auctioning off inventories of defunct businesses. New stuff. There would be no little old ladies crying as their belongings were carted away.

The next Sunday, Scott and I parked in the Brookfield Marriott Hotel parking lot and strolled into the lobby where we paid a registration fee. “We get charged to shop? What a scam!” one of us scoffed. We were auction neos. Neither of us had any idea what we were about to experience, and in a cloud of blissful ignorance, pushed open the double doors and entered the auction hall.

The place was huge, the size of two basketball courts. Hundreds of people milled around various display areas. Chairs were arranged theater-style in the middle of the room, facing a lectern at which the auctioneer would stand. Furniture and sculptures cluttered one side of the room and jewelry tables stretched along the other side of the hall; you had to wait in line to see the rings and watches. Fir coats hung in a corralled area in back and oriental rugs were piled in enormous stacks on tables in front of the room. Scott and I moved toward the rugs.

They were gorgeous—hand-tied, lambs wool rugs—and right away, Scott and I found four or five that we liked. Then we looked at the price tags, printed with suggested retail prices, and realized that we could afford *none* of them. How much lower might their prices go during the auction, we asked one another. Who knew? We’d never been to an auction before. We jotted down some identification numbers of the rugs we liked and grabbed seats near the front of the hall. Should we even bother to stay? Well, we’d already paid to get in. We might as well stick around a while. And anyway, we had only been able to examine small corners of most of the rugs because the weight of the rugs above imprisoned those beneath them. One had to extrapolate what the rest of the rug might look like from a tiny corner bit. A staff person assured us that each rug would be held up and displayed under spotlights once the auction began, so we decided to stay.

But we looked at the prices again and it all seemed hopeless, another wild goose chase...until we overheard a conversation between a couple guys sitting near us. One of them owned a rug store in Milwaukee and was telling his neighbor that rugs normally sold for 15–20¢ on the dollar at auctions like this one. Scott and I sucked in our breath, looked at one another, and then did some hasty calculations. We suddenly realized that we might be able to afford to buy a rug at this auction after all.

The auctioneer—reminding me of Robert Preston in *The Music Man*—introduced himself and the rules with an entertaining line of patter as people gradually settled down into their seats. He assured us that we could scratch our heads or rub our eyes without fear unintentional bidding, but that if we felt warm and fanned ourselves with the yellow placard on which our bidding numbers were printed, we might find ourselves driving home with an unwanted carload of firs. I could already feel myself getting nervous, so I leaned over to Scott and said to him, “You’re in charge of the bidding card.”

“OK,” Scott said. “But you’re in charge of making the final decision on which rug we bid on.”

I agreed. It seemed a reasonable division of responsibilities. We’ve long recognized that we each employ very different purchasing styles. While I’m capable of making snap decisions, Scott has been known to agonize for days over a purchase. One time, while shopping for a present for his sister, he debated whether or not to buy a little box of Godiva chocolates for her. He decided to sleep on the decision, and returned the next day to buy the candy. Not me. I dislike shopping, and when I decide that I’m going to buy something, I tend to go out and plunk down money the first time I find something suitable. Since moving in together, we’ve both changed our styles to accommodate the other: I’ve agreed that it’s reasonable to do a little research for large purchases and Scott takes more risks with smaller purchases.

But this time, it was pretty clear that a snap decision would be required when “our” rugs came up for auction. The auctioneer was funny and entertaining, but mostly he was fast. He rotated through the various lots in the room, spending 15 minutes on coats, 15 minutes on jewelry, 15 minutes on rugs, dawdling sometimes for a whole minute or two on an individual item. People were obviously bidding, and once in a while we heard someone yell out a number, but usually we failed to turn around quickly enough to catch anyone in the actual act of making a bid. The auction

veterans seemed to consider it an advantage to avoid their opponents' scrutiny. Scott and I began to regret our possibly naive conversation just before the auction began in which we openly discussed the absolute top price we would be willing to pay for any of the rugs. We began to dimly perceive there was a strategy to this bidding business and to understand that we'd probably blown the most basic rule.

Ah well. We listened as the auctioneer began the bidding process by asking for a certain price. No one ever agreed with this price. The auctioneer would then begin dropping his "suggested" price, going lower and lower, usually to an outrageous pittance, until someone out in the audience waved their yellow placard, and someone else counter-waved—at which point the bidding would escalate precipitously, often far above the price the auctioneer had originally suggested. But in a minute and a half it was over, and the roller coaster ride stopped...for the moment.

The scary part, to me, was my suspicion that once I began bidding, it would be difficult to stop, no matter how firmly we had agreed upon an "absolute top price." The process seemed to allow no time to be sensible. Luckily, Scott was in charge of the yellow card and bidding strategy. I was responsible for looking at the rugs as they were held up under the bright spotlights by two guys standing on the table, each one holding a corner of the rug above their head—and visualizing it in our living room. I was in charge of saying "No," or "This is the one."

The first of "our" rugs (#5) came up for bidding about 45 minutes after we'd walked into the room. Two men held it up under the lights and Scott nudged me. "Well? What do you think?"

The whole rug, suddenly illuminated, surprised me. It contained far more green than was apparent in the small corner we'd been able to uncover earlier. I shook my head. "No. Too green." Scott gasped and laughed at my quick decision, and relaxed as the bidding quickened around us and finally settled on a price that we could have easily afforded. We exchanged significant glances, but restrained ourselves from betraying any excitement.

We had copied down identification numbers for five rugs, and unfortunately, the order of our preference was exactly the reverse of the order these five rugs were coming up for auction. That is, our least favorite rug was the first rug to be auctioned, and our favorite rug would be auctioned last. Gradually the problem became clear to us. We could wait to bid on our favorite rug, but if we lost that rug, we'd never get a chance

to bid on any of the other four. On the other hand, if we bid on any of the other rugs, and won it, we would lose our chance to bid on our favorite. My stomach began to churn.

The next, our second-last choice (#4) rug, was displayed. It was a gorgeous rug, woven with subtle black and gold patterns, and would have looked beautiful in our living room except that it was too large for the space. So, I easily rejected it. The next three rugs—blue (#3), red (#2) and brown (#1)—would present us with much more difficult decisions, but luckily, this particular auction segment had ended and the auctioneer moved on to some bronze, original castings by Remington, and we were able to relax for a few moments.

The bidding for the Remingtons very quickly reached five figures, taking our breaths away. Jewelry and watches were auctioned off next, and then some coats. However, before the auctioneer returned to the rugs, we were surprised to see one of the clerks returning to the podium with a bronze sculpture of a cowboy, waving his hat, astride a bucking horse. It was one of the Remingtons that had been won only a few moments ago. The auctioneer addressed us sternly, dropping his Music Man persona for the moment—and warned us that anyone whose credit proved not sufficient to cover their bid would likewise lose their prize. And furthermore, if the item did not attract an equal or greater bid in a second auction round, that they would be billed for the difference. In fact, the Remington received no bids at all this time, and I still wonder what eventually happened.

But we didn't have any time to mull the implications at the moment. The spotlight above the oriental rugs was suddenly switched on again, and two guys leaped up onto the rug table. My heart pounded. They raised the blue (#3) rug up over their heads to the light, the auctioneer chanted descending prices, and I could feel Scott's eyes upon me. In a moment he would ask, "Well?" It was a beautiful rug, but I wasn't sure I really liked its flowery pattern. I wished I could stare at it for a few more moments. More than that, I wished I could compare it side-by-side with #2 and #1. What if I said "no" to this rug and then it turned out that I disliked the other two? What if other bidders offered higher prices for the next two rugs and this was our last chance? Would we ever come upon such a bargain again? I bit my lip.

Scott said, "Well?" his voice full of anxiety. The bidding had already begun. Scott nervously tapped the yellow card on his knee. The Music Man was throwing us appraising glances. I clenched both my hands into fists

and pounded them nervously on my legs.

"No." I said, my heart sinking a bit. "No, I don't like it. I think it's going to be the brown one." Scott nodded and folded his hands on top of the card.

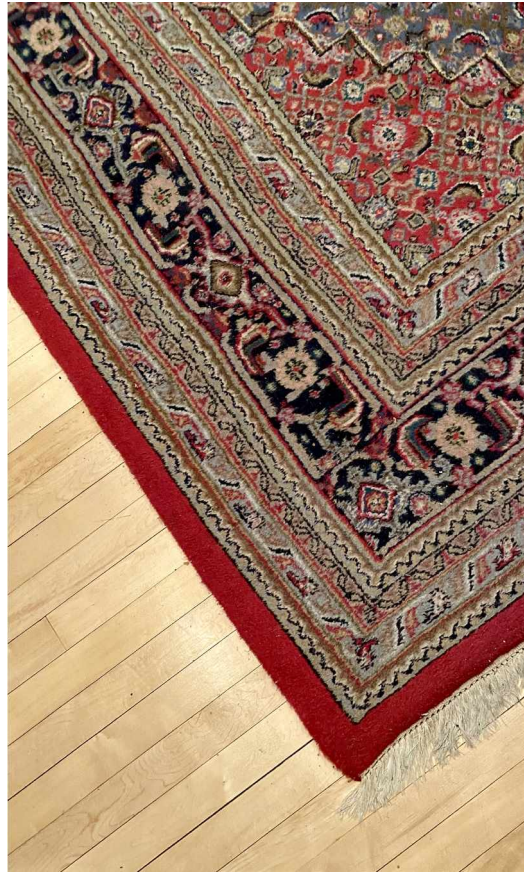
But we weren't going to be allowed a quiet moment to recover: The red rug (#2) was already tumbling into the light. "Oh, no," I said under my breath. Just as the visible corner of the first, green rug had misled me about its appearance, I had misjudged this red rug on the evidence of its border design. I had been expecting the red to entirely dominate and was prepared to reject it because it would be too much in our small living room. But in fact, the intricate gray and black (non-flowery) interior detail created a far more subtle effect than I had expected. It would

work beautifully with our gray couches. I liked it. And suddenly Scott was squeezing my arm, a note of panic in his voice. I realized that he'd been trying to get my attention for several seconds already...but I couldn't speak! I wanted to see the brown rug. How could I make an instantaneous choice that would eliminate the other choice?

But Scott persisted. "Will this rug work?"

"Yes," I croaked, without tearing my eyes away from the rug, still scrutinizing its colors and patterns, trying to imagine how it would look on our living room floor. And an instant later, Scott was asking me again, "is this the one?"

He'd entered the bid stream and I hadn't even been aware of it. I can't even tell you how often he waved that yellow placard or how many others in the room were competing with us for the rug. But I finally looked at him and he told me that the bidding was to us and was up to our limit. (I glanced up at Harold Hill the Auction Man who stared at us impatiently.) We had to decide NOW. I couldn't breathe, I could hardly move; but managed to turn my gaze to the rug again where it shimmered under the spotlight. I tried to speak, and failed. But finally I nodded stiffly, anguished. (What if I changed my mind a moment later?) and Scott swished



that yellow placard above his head. A second later, silence answered the auctioneer as he tried to rouse a higher price and then he yelled, "Sold!" and it was over. We owned a rug that we'd examined for barely a moment.

"Let's get out of here," I said, shell-shocked. And we both rose and stumbled toward the doors in the back of the room. As I pulled open one of the doors I looked back and saw the brown rug being raised into the light and laughed. The colors were lovely, but the brown rug's interior pattern was made up entirely of cute little abstract animals: I did not like it. If we had passed on the red rug and waited for the brown, we would never have bid on a rug at all. We'd made the right decision. I laughed again, relief flooding through me.

"We couldn't have afforded the brown rug, even if we wanted it," said Scott, who was monitoring the bids. The high bid had already surpassed our limit.

So we hung around in the lobby for a while waiting for the paperwork to be delivered to the registration table. Neither of us cared to spend any more time at the auction, it was such a scary place. We were both glad to have escaped. Why had it been so scary? ...Because it had contradicted all the home ownership lessons we'd learned so painstakingly: the whole experience had taken far less time and cost us less than we expected...

We thought it was over. I handed the clerk my charge card, telling Scott, "I'll put it on my card. I just paid off the balance. My card is completely clear." But it wasn't clear. The computers hadn't recorded my check yet, and for a moment I panicked, imagining our rug dragged back into the auction room to be resold like the Remington sculpture. But Scott saved the day with his own credit card, and a moment later we pushed the rolled-up carpet into the back of our station wagon and drove over to my parents' house for dinner.

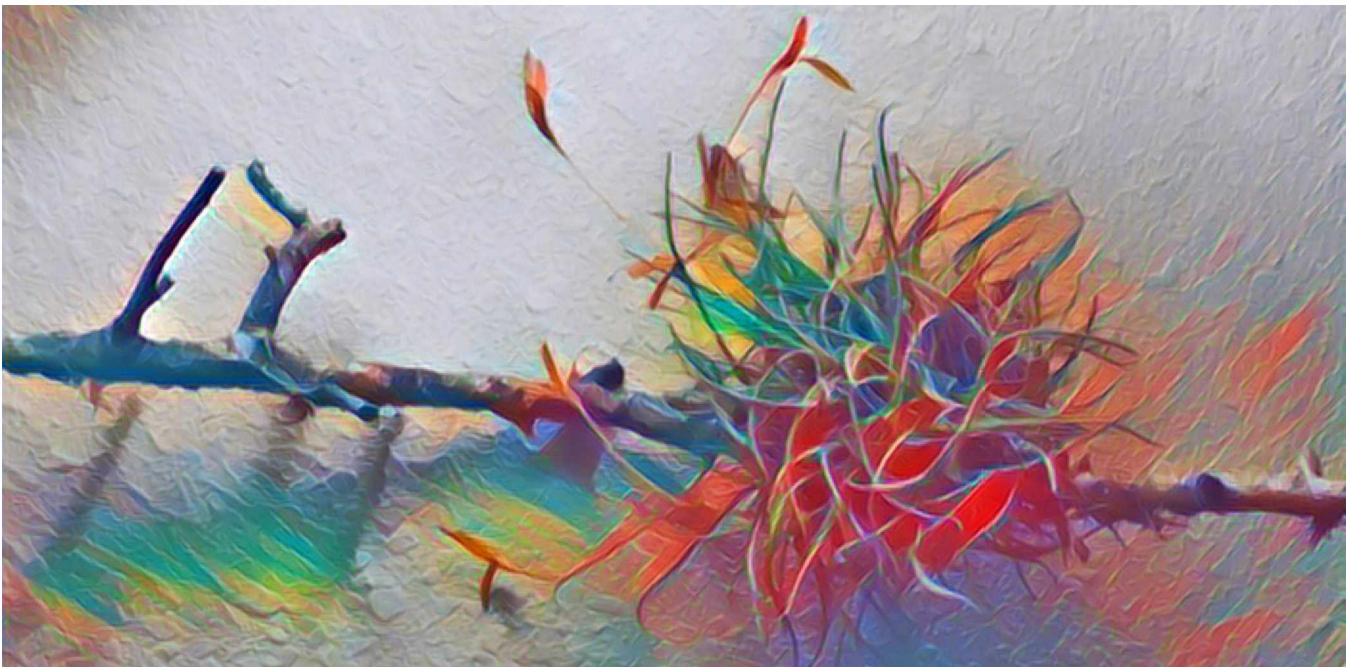
"So, what's your next project?" asked mom.

"Anything that takes longer and costs more that we expect, I hope," I said. ❀



Jeanne received her first Covid shot, joining Team Moderna, on Tuesday, 2/16/21, and experienced no side-effects. Now she dreams of swimming laps again, soon. Scott, being a youngster, several months shy of his 65th birthday, will have to wait a while longer.

See you all next month.
 —Scott and Jeanne, February 2021



Just a doodle