Further Adventures in ApocaLit

Earlier this year I wrote about a few examples of ApocaLit I had been reading as the world seemingly bursts into flame around us. I have continued to mine this vein of things-are-fucked-up-and-bullshit entertainments. Is this a strategy of face the beast head on or escape the beast by engaging a substitute? Works for me either way.

The looming specter of a great contagion or disaster that destroys civilization is as old as time: the Epic of Gilgamesh, Noah and the flood, the Revelations, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, &c. My recent readings have been not quite that old: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*(1915).

The Shelley and London books provide instructive examples of the limitations of speculative/sci fi written in any period. Both books take place c. 2073. For Shelley, that year is the beginning of the end, which (Spolier!) culminates in the narrator as the last surviving human in 2100, wandering barefoot and revenant. For London, the plague arrived in 2013 and pretty well wiped out all but a sliver of humankind in a matter of months; our narrator is telling a gang of feral lads about what things had once been like, before.

One notable feature is how the authors could not imagine too far beyond the prevailing technological norms of their times. For Shelley, this means a total absence of rapid

communication, transport almost entirely via horse and buggy or on horse back, and continued reliance on candles and torches. The language is High Romantic, and at 375 pages it is an overdose of the lofty, enough to make one wish for the sweet release of the plague itself.

Example: The narrator has been infected and is sure to die. (Spoiler: He is one of the few to survive and gain immunity.) He flies to his beloved (because of course he did) and over the course of three pages, this flowery tosspot goes on a Romantic tear, finally spilling the tea: He has the plague. They clasp hands and heave their bosoms, likely while bringing the backs of their hands to their troubled brows.

There are indeed moments when a heartfelt "Yo girl, you know I love you so much, but I'm dying yo" would be more apt. But alas, and forthwith, we have Lionel Verney as a guide, not Jason Mendoza.

Now that there is some romancin'
Shelly was working out some deep personal trauma with this book, written in the wake of her beloved Percy's death by drowning. Frankly, I do not recommend this book as a casual escape from our own looming worries, unless you just love you some High Romantic puffery. The first half of the book is plague-free, and Shelley paints the idyllic scene of meadows and glade and Nature's wondrous bounty and depicts Percy and Byron pretty clearly in her two main protagonists. All is bliss and crashing ennui.

Since you are not going to read this anyway, here's the book's secret. By this time in her life, Shelley is well and truly over the glory of nature riff. Her man is dead, and the world is bleak. More than any real attempt at speculative fiction – hell, everybody still holds Shakespeare and Haydn as the exemplars of cultural achievement – this book is Mary Shelley taking the piss out of Percy's and Byron's childish fantasies.

Read in that light, there is a certain sharp edge to her mimicry of the High Romantic folderol. But the joke is way inside, and suffers to sustain several hundred pages.

(To be fair to Shelley, she was indeed a badass in many ways. After *Last Man*, I went back and re-read *Frankenstein* (1818) for the first time since high school, and it just. fucking. rocks. She wrote it on a challenge between Byron, Percy, and herself to see who could come up with the scariest story. She won. She was 20. Bad. Ass. Those boys had no idea who they were dealing with.)

Jack London, on the other hand, gets right to the point and whipsaws us through the tale of disaster in a brisk 160 pages. London was an unapologetically commercial writer; intent on making a buck to buy the next bottle of hooch. These days, London is remembered chiefly as a writer of adolescent adventure fantasy, best known for his Alaska potboilers and other tales of derring do. But he was also a socialist activist, taking every opportunity to slip rad ideas into his stories. Yet another visionary unfairly derided for his 'genre fiction'.

(His book *The Iron Heel* (1908), one of the earliest dystopian novels of authoritarian horror, is terrific. Get it. It predates Orwell and Huxley by a longshot, and is a good fifteen years before Soviet dissident Yevgeny Zamyatin published *We* (1924), which both Huxley and Vonnegut lifted pretty much intact for *Brave New World* and *Player Piano*. To his credit, Vonnegut happily admitted the theft. Not our Aldous.)

London's plague chronicle takes a more robust stab at the sci-fi/speculative realm than Shelley. Granted, he had the advantage of another century of 'progress' to draw upon. There are aspects of global communication and air travel, but the narrative is still trapped in an early-20th century framework. (*Iron Heel* was much more successful in its imaginings of

future ‘improvements’.)

Unlike pioneer speculators like HG Wells and Asimov, or later savants like PK Dick and William Gibson, neither of these writers managed to extrapolate much beyond their own near-horizons. This is not a complaint so much as it is to acknowledge how difficult it can be to really imagine something that does not yet exist. The people who successfully anticipated changes that eventually arrived are notable exceptions. (See also the proliferation of flying cars that look like shark-finned Chevy and Cadillac models from late 50s speculative efforts. Not to mention the speculative brassieres that seemed cut from the same template!)

I read the London as I was halfway through Shelley. I needed a break from the “O mighty heavens that span above like a twinkling etc.” It’s a quick read, and really fun, too. The narrator was once a professor of literature, probably at Berkeley. (London loved the Bay Area settings.) After the plague did its job, he became a wanderer, member of one tribal group or another as necessity demanded. As he begins his tale around a campfire, his speech is raw, unadorned. But as he gets going, he falls back into his professorial mode, much to the aggravation of the feral teens he is addressing.

“Why do you have to use made up words like ‘scarlet’? Can’t you just say red?”

But our man is undeterred, and as he carries on, his original love for the humanities rekindles, and he enthuses about the aspects of what was lost. He talks of finding a library during his lonely wanderings, sounding as wistful as Henry Bemis. He implores his young friends to hear his pleas to learn to read and write and to commit to preserving the best of humanity’s works. All but one boy wanders off laughing at him.

It may seem perverse to find solace in these sagas of collapse (fwiw, *Mr Robot* was a deep obsession here at the casa this

spring, and the latest pair from William Gibson is a ripping yarn), but it can be comforting to see how relatively not-awful our situation is compared to the fevered speculations of these tales of societal disintegration.

Because it could never get as bad as all that. Right?

Stanwyck Read the News Today, Oh Boy!

TALLAHASSEE, FL: BREAKING NEWS

A rarely seen wave of mass happiness, hope, and relaxation spread across Florida's Capital City this weekend as citizens embraced the return of competence, character, and decency to the White House.

Long thought to be on the verge of extinction, some scientists believe this leading wave indicates the end of a long drought both here and around the nation.

Recently transplanted Florida Man and two-time loser of the popular vote for the Presidency has gone into seclusion. Aides suggest he just needs time to tend to his bruised fee-fees and urge all Americans to "just let him stay for a while longer until he feels ready."

> *While Biden supporters reacted with joy, elation, and tears of relief, partisans of the two time loser reacted with their sole reliable emotional mechanism: inchoate rage and anger against Those People™. As has been demonstrated for the past four years, these outbursts run the gamut from demented to slapstick…*

Yes indeed, we're feeling pretty good here in America's most penis-like state, despite the fact that more than half of our citizenry voted for four more years of incompetence, graft, and cruelty. Not to mention 70 million or so people across the country.

As always when Democrats win (or lose) the punditocracy comes along to remind us how important it is for us to treat our vanquished foes with empathy and a spirit of compromise so that we might "come together" in a great squish of kumbaya.

Bollocks, I say. All of them.

I get it, the disappointment when your team comes up short. But Jesus Christ on late night television, people. The idea that we not only have to forgive the unhinged abuse of the past four years – when the Trump dead enders can't even concede the fact that they've lost – well, no, sorry. Forgiveness is earned through contrition.

And I'll say straight up: Anyone who voted for Trump – especially this time around, after everything that was predicted about a Trump presidency was proved both true and unexaggerated – has a lot to atone for. Especially when the prevailing justification for a second term was to stick it to the libs.

As for anyone who worked to keep this nightmare alive – from the lowliest GOP hack (did someone say Evan Power) to the elected GOP toadies and the careerist stooges who enable them – please to kindly fuck off and go to work cleaning bedpans in

COVID wards for the next four to forty years. There is no room for you in decent society.

Kumbaya my ass.

Over the past four years, the dark politics of resentment have been unleashed upon our land. Nakedly cruel and often violent expressions of racism and nationalism have been given permission to run free. I fear that those elements, back out of the box after such a long-deserved period of hiding shamefully under the rocks, will not go away without at least a few horrific tantrums. Am I really to clasp hands with someone who spent four years counseling me to fuck my feelings when he has a long gun on his shoulder, “just in case”.

Let’s say no.

On the lighter side, some of the reaction has been well ripened comedy. One commenter encapsulated the zeitgeist when he declared his willingness to die for Trump, his unwillingness to live under a “communist” like Biden, and absolute plans to leave the United States behind before it becomes a communist nation. His declared destination?

Guam.

Who’s gonna tell him? Maybe he could try New Mexico next.

In the meantime, WH sources tell reporters that Trump plans a series of his famous rallies to gin up the rubes once more to empty their pockets and expose themselves to COVID. One can only hope that any venue contacted will demand payment up front, and that local authorities will demand a security bond. Trump is notorious for stiffing his creditors, especially when his enterprise is struggling and he is drowning in debt. Like now.

Maybe there is a Ritz Carlton Seed and Feed barn or a LaQuinta Import Food warehouse he can afford.

As for the awesomely timed Four Seasons* press conference televised synchronously with the declaration of Biden's victory, well, I just gotta say it almost made the four days of waiting worth the agita to see the coup de grace delivered – upon a campaign that began on a faux-gold escalator – in a landscaper's parking lot between a dildo shop and a crematorium. For all the ludicrous turns this drama has taken, the writers should take a well-earned bow on that one.

[LATE BREAKING: The first speaker at the Four Seasons Landscaping and Donut Emporium rally turns out to be a convicted child sex offender. I have to say this particular plot twist is a bit heavy handed, but maybe he's the only guy Rudy could find to help him "tuck his shirt in". No word from Qanon on whether there is a secret passage behind the fertilizer display.]

In the meantime, suggestions are rampant that Biden prove his willingness to unify the country by appointing people like John Kasich to his administration, a man whose distance from actual Trump policy could fit on a pin head like Marco Rubio. It's a good time to remind ourselves that the great majority of Never Trumpers barely differ with the Orange Grifter on any substantive policy questions: from taxes to deregulation to the packing of the judiciary with Federalist Society clones to tickling the balls of the NRA fundies, the GOP – even if purged of the less polite elements – will remain an autocracy wannabe, theocratically based kakistocracy. Pretending otherwise just because Rick Wilson's eyes twinkle when he savages Trump is pure foolishness.

And god save us from Blue Dog types who are floating names like Rahm Emanuel and the like.

The early and typical sniping within the Democratic Party is entirely predictable aside from the refreshingly sharp articulation from progressives like AOC who know how to push back and refute the oatmeal-consistency whining from DNC-

approved centrists. This internecine bickering is a fine way to undo the mobilization that brought out the unprecedented numbers of BIPOC voters who turned this election.

James Baldwin famously said, “As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.”

The chips are down, America. As long as you cling to the notion that this is a white nation, there is no hope. I suspect Biden understands this. If not, I’m confident Kamala will be at the ready to correct him.

Now, Where Was I?

Your Narrator apologizes for the radio silence and the inexcusable five month interval since last I set font to pixel. Mea maxima. I don’t know about the rest of you, but it has been kind of a crazy year living in the bubble out from which we have barely poked our masked little heads.

Our life in seclusion has been damn near idyllic. I have Stanwyck and the dogs and an abundance of books and music, and best of all, time to engage them all. But the view from the fishbowl has been terrifying. My position of privilege has never been so starkly lit as I compare my little acre of heaven against the outrages and suffering that mark our world.

I let the blog drop because it felt hopeless and impotent and

sadly performative to catalog the atrocities of the wider world as if I had something unique to offer. Everything was being said. Beyond a few notebooks filled with my random scribblings and bemoanments, I have had few words.

(Literally. One of the knock on effects of last year's mad scientist adventure has been a touch of brain fog that manifests most upsettingly as an inability to call up words. For a while this was a real problem, but things are getting better. Still, just last week I was unable to remember what kind of tree we had planted in the back yard. It was right there in front of me. I stared at it forever. Absolutely no idea. Finally, after two days, it came to me during my nightly session of angst: crepe myrtle. How obscure.)

Nightly session of angst, you ask?

Yup. Regular as dawn, only earlier. I'm generally good for an hour or two of dread terror between 3-6 a.m. This is the time when the protective bubble disappears and the full horror of our situation becomes undeniable. So many people are dying, killed by the state either through direct violence or intentional neglect. People are losing loved ones, jobs, businesses. We witness the slow accretion of autocratic power consolidation and the emergence of an American Taliban in firm control of the federal judiciary.

Our kids are navigating a moment where their whole lives should open ahead of them in wondrous possibility. What is their world going to look like? Will we continue – even accelerate – our descent into tribalized enmity? Will we spend the next XX many years worrying about pandemics and theo- and autocratic repression?

Will we continue to be governed by a two-bit grifter from Queens, an incurious lard sack in diapers who refers to himself unironically as a "perfect physical specimen"?

It is no exaggeration that the current regime has been almost

preternaturally incompetent and indifferent towards its citizens – at least when it has not been intentionally and efficiently cruel, as with the immigration nightmare. It has been hard to bear witness to this tumbling train wreck, especially since the GOP Senate gave the man* a pass on conspiring with foreign governments to rig an election.

Once the GOP stamped his get out of impeachment free card, there has been no institutional lever available to stop his impulsive rampages. The judiciary is larded through with enough Federalist stooges to protect him and the DOJ has been effectively co-opted as his personal law firm. All the outraged "I demand…" or "I stand against…" sputterings in the world are as spitballs in the wind. Cable news and the interwebs are chockablock with that performative nonsense. And whenever I sat down to write a blog post, it seemed that was all I had to offer, too.

So. Silence.

But today is the hinge day, the pivot. The day we start to resume our nation's imperfect march to greater inclusion and decency, to a commonwealth rooted in mutual respect.

Or not.

Last night's recitation of terrors were all about today. As have been, largely, the catechisms of the past several months. I find it no more probable today that Cheetolini will win than I did four years ago. But it happened then and it could happen again.

Even if Biden wins resoundingly, I lie awake wondering if trump will actually leave. The man faces serious legal and financial consequence the second he reverts to private citizenship. The shield of the presidency is all that stands between him and utter ruin. And some of the characters holding his loan notes do not look kindly upon failure to pay. Putin is not some contractor in Bayonne for whom a strongly worded

letter from the latest version of Roy Cohn might act as deterrent to aggressive collection methods.

I worry, in the wee dark hours, that our locked and loaded swath of cosplay Rambos and Gravy Seal warriors have talked themselves into believing that their violent fantasies are not only justified, but spiritually ordained. The violence has already bubbled over. The USA isn't Rwanda or Northern Ireland or Beirut, but neither were those places. Until they were.

I toss and punch my pillow at the fact that a good portion of our community still sneers at COVID prevention as either foolish or a Satanic infringement on their God-given right to…well, that last bit is unclear, as inchoate pronouncements of Constitutional principles – mostly imaginary – are the stock in trade of folks who can say with a straight face that trump is a man* of integrity who makes and keeps promises.

I twitch myself to sleep despairing that even if we replace the chump, at least 35-40% of our friends and families will continue to fervently believe that Joe Biden is a closet commie, or a pedophile, or a stooge for China or Ukraine or whatever other projection trump flings his way. That without trump, our nation is doomed.

What to do with that kind of madness? What to do when people still believe that the economy is better under trump than Obama? What to do with people hepped up on guns and Fox news and Qanon?

No matter how long I stare at the dark ceiling, I find no answer. I can only grab at a slim reed of hope. And that hope is this: Biden will win, Dems will take both houses of Congress. The new administration will work diligently to reverse the decline engendered by the GOP extremists, much as Obama had to do after Bush the Lesser.

For all Obama accomplished, his 'look forward not back' approach to the malfeasance of the Bush years gave license to

the more extravagant depredations of the trump regime. I hope that we will see a thorough house cleaning investigation that calls to account those who have used their connections and power to enrich themselves.

I hope the Democrats will govern aggressively and fairly to remediate at least some of the damage done to our institutions and our common wealth.

I hope beyond hope that we will not have to find out what a second trump term will do to our nation.

And then, having thrashed about for a couple of hours in the darkness, I sleep a fitful couple of hours before I awaken again in my beautiful little bubble, with my best friend and two doggos all abed and safe.

As I warned, I do not have much to say that is not already out there. At best, many of you will nod along in recognition. At worst, I’m just the bloggy equivalent of a cable news gabbler striving to keep you watching til the next commercial.

Hope it helps at least a little.