

COVIDream #2



In which the nightly escape from our waking nightmare is sometimes not.

I find myself toiling once again in the corporate world, this time an ominous place focused on cyber security. I actually worked for two hi tech security firms along the way. It was very Blade Runner: all black and grey metals with finish ranging from flat matte to deeply reflective without being at all shiny; black and grey carpet in the usual industrial pattern that is not a pattern; lighting that was more than ample to see and work, but still felt dark; and, that i2b dream staple, the elevator banks that move from place to place of their own volition, and that never seem to take you to the same place twice.

My first day at work. No idea what I am supposed to be working on. I get hungry. Since I don't know anybody – everybody is very standoffish, almost rude about it – I set out to find food alone. There is a very pleasant cafe/tavern next door, or so it seems. Their menu is about 40 pages long, and has lots of lush photos of food that they do not seem to serve. They have a very detailed beer listing, though. However, the joint is part of and for the security company only, and does not serve alcohol during business hours. The company runs 24/7, so, no. I return to HQ, starving, and buy a few chocolatey baked treats and some coffee in the lobby. All the baked treats are chocolate or something else dark, to match the visual aesthetic of the place.

I get on the elevator back to my cubicle. Guy next to me says, "You must be new."

At last, a friendly voice. Sort of.

"Yes, first day."

"Go easy on the muffins. That shit will fuck you up."

Door opens, my new friend disappears. Later, I find out the hard way that, yes, the muffins are laced with amphetamines, anti-anxiety agents, and various other behavioral modifiers. Goody's powder for the cyber age, reckon. But I was starving, so I tucked right in. Yum.

I exit the elevator in what I think is the right place, but nothing looks like where I was before. My cubicle is an extension of the building vibe: dark, weirdly quiet, and the cubicles are finished in a silken fabric that is almost irresistible to touch, right on the borderline between luxe and creepy. A chair that feels like a massage headed for a happy ending. I also have a fine monitor/speaker system for watching movies – from a company approved list – because, they "don't mind how you spend your time as long as you get your work done".

This area is...different. A bank of harsh fluorescence hangs from a drop ceiling with most of the tiles missing. The cubicles are all beige and tatty. Chairs are wobbly, arms missing, cushion bursting out of torn 'leather'. The biggest difference: nothing but H1-B immigrant workers, mostly Asian or Indo-Pakistani, crammed butts to nuts, wearing headset communicators and staring into old CRT monitors. Typing for their lives. Dressed in black, head to toe. I see a jug at every person's feet: make-do urinals so they never have to leave their desk. Lots of muffin remains and crumbs. One person notices me and stops working to stare. That disruption in the collective flow seems to make everyone stop as one and stare my way.

“Sorry, I’m lost.”

The only white guy on this floor walks up to me. Black khakis, black polo with embroidered company logo. Same outfit as the H1B folks, but blacker. Earpiece. Phone and taser on his belt. He steers me back to the elevator, which seems to have moved to a completely different place.

“Be more careful next time. This is a security company. No room for errors.”

I get on and press – what floor am I anyway? – 12, why not. The elevator accelerates fast enough to knock me off balance. But it is moving horizontally. Another fixture of 12b dreams: elevators that move horizontally.

I emerge in a different building entirely and on a higher floor than before. Maybe a diagonal elevator? Same aesthetic, but abandoned. Wires hanging from the ceiling, chairs toppled, piles of cubicle pieces. I toss my coffee and wrappers in an overflowing trash can. Very much the setting of the last scene of *Fight Club*. Figure this is not the place for me, so I turn right around to an elevator that is no longer there. Well shit.

Voices in the corridors. I find my way to a cluster of people at yet another bank of elevators. They go quiet. Clearly suspicious and almost hostile. I get on the elevator and hit 7 – that’s my floor! hope I’m in the right building!

I emerge to familiar surroundings. My manager – actually a very friendly manager I worked for years back – sees me and welcomes me back.

“Trouble with the elevators?”

She laughs and smiles. Maybe I’m not crazy. She leads me back to my cube. I take an opportunity to ask about my duties.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get something to you soon enough. Until

then, just watch a movie, or read, or nap. Whatever. It's just important that you get here on time. Oh, and there will probably be a lot of required overtime. Nights and weekends. Hope that's okay."

Now Kate and I worked together for a long stretch at a company that got bought and sold many times until someone finally bought and cut it up for parts and tax writeoffs.

"Kate, this is embarrassing. We've had so many owners and name changes, I can't quite remember the name of the company now."

"I know, it's crazy. I forget too. Let's just call it Hell."

And she laughs again, tells me to be sure to be onsite when required, and waves.

"You should try the muffins from downstairs. They're GREAT!"

Weeks pass. Months, maybe years. I still have had no assignments, no work to do. But the pay is good, and I get to watch movies and such. The nights and weekends are pretty damned annoying, but jobs are hard to come by.

Elevators continue to move around, offices and cubicles don't stay in the same place for long. I never see Kate again. And I eat muffins all the damn time.

One stretch at work goes on for three straight days. I go home exhausted. Our house is a little company bungalow, one of hundreds exactly alike. I find it boarded up with a police notice on the front door. Crime Scene. Do Not Enter. Investigation Site.

With the company logo at the bottom.

I go back to work. Where else would I go? When I get there, I take the elevator to my cubicle. The elevator dumps me out into the gaggle of H1B workers.

Cops in riot gear have a bunch of the visa employees lined up on their knees. Zip tied. Terrified. A couple of bloody noses.

Cop in those wrap around dude bro sunglasses gives me a chilling grin.

“I told you he’d come back to the crime scene.”

They grab me and start reciting all my crimes. Apparently I am the kingpin of a gang of saboteurs working to undermine global security by infiltrating the Company.

The proof? All that time I spent at The Company when I had no work to do, no reason to be there. Tracking my movements, including suspicious wanderings to parts of the complex where I have no business.

~ FIN ~

Note: This dream spanned several successions of waking and going back to sleep. Usually I can ‘change the channel’ on my dreams by rolling to another side or the like, but not this time. Any wonder I am always tired?

COVIDream #1



The nightly dreamscape has been wild of late. This series hopes to capture some of the weirdiality. Not necessarily significant. But damn....

I am on a business trip to Atlanta, sometime post-pandemic. I rent a car because I am told mass transit is impossible, and taxis are dead because Uber/Lyft killed them before they died.

I drive out to Chamblee (!) for my morning meeting. My car is stolen during the meeting, and the rental company has none to replace it. Due to so many car thefts, apparently.

My next meeting is in Decatur. So I start walking. And walking. It is hot as hell, then it rains, then it is even hotter. I finally realize it is too far to walk. I see a MARTA bus stop. I wait. When the bus arrives, I get on, fumbling for money. Dead silence falls.

I look up and everybody is staring. Everyone is dressed to the nines, and the bus is ultra-luxury. Leather seats, calm lighting. A waiter serves refreshments.

“How much to ride?”

The driver, in his very neatly pressed uniform, looks me up and down. I’m a sweaty mess, but I’m wearing a decent suit, so I guess he figures I’m sort of okay.

“You can’t ride without a swipe card. No cash allowed. There is a place downstairs in the building on the corner where you can get one. If you can get one, you can catch the next bus. It will be here in five minutes.”

I scramble to look for the card vendor. The downstairs of the building has multiple storefronts and businesses. There are no signs. I keep sticking my head into places and asking until I find the place.

Suspicious stares. I ask to buy a swipe card for a ride.

“Sorry. We don’t sell single rides. Minimum one hundred dollars ride credit plus a fifty dollar card fee.”

“But I don’t live here. I’m just visiting.”

More suspicion. Another worker picks up a phone, whispering. The woman “helping” me turns on her best customer service smile, and chirps:

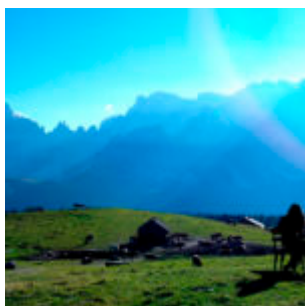
“It’s the best way to keep the riff raff off the bus. Keeps them nice and clean this way. It improves the customer experience.”

I pay. She hands me my card.

“As soon as your background check is complete, your card will be activated. Give it 24-48 hours. And thank you for choosing MARTA. I hope you enjoy your rides.”

~FIN~

The Opposite of Nothingness, Part II



A quick addendum to yesterday’s post made necessary because I am really out of practice at this so I forgot the main thing I wanted to share about Wu Fei.

Around three weeks ago, Wu Fei announced that she would present a piece of music every day through a subscription service. There are two options: You can pay a little bit per month to receive a piece every day, or you can take the unpaid

option that brings you a piece every Monday and Friday.

Like most artists, Wu Fei faces a real challenge: How to continue to create new work, engage with an audience, and earn some income. Her solution, in part, is this subscription series.

The twice-a-week-for-free option is a no brainer. Just do it. Click [here](#) to take a listen to today's piece, "Green Plums and a Bamboo Horse".

If you can throw in a little coin, "[y]ou'll also be supporting a new way of creating music as a livelihood, and motivating me to compose or improvise an original piece of music every single day," as Wu Fei explains at her project site.

It's a mere \$8.88 a month for the full ride, around 29 cents a pop for a new sliver of beauty in your life every day. You can also give gift subscriptions to your pals who may be a tad short on the dosh these days.

Most days Wu Fei's new piece is the first thing I listen to. Today's piece has run through three times so far.

Sign up. Just do it.

**The Opposite of Nothingness:
My Favorite World #39 (COVID
Series #1)**



I danced around this piece all last week. With everything so upheaved, I felt obligated to deliver something with heft, depth, and consequence. To offer something that might offset the grim reality that plagues our everyday.

Writing essays about how the world is fucked up and bullshit are easy enough in normal times. Now it's just shooting fish in a barrel. And really, what's the point? Don't even get me started on the futility of coming up with something fictional when we are living inside some Mary Shelley/Camus/Kafka fever dream. We are all sharing the same streams of information, more or less, and unless you are gamboling around the fringier fringes of the internet machine, the news is stark: This shit is real and it is not going away quickly. That first rush of "I can ride this out standing on my head" bravado has withered and died. The long haul, we are in it, and sorry y'all, but it feels like so much nothingness I could just fucking scream.

Thus my bright idea to leaven the isolation by offering up some My Favorite World diversions. Share a few tidbits that might lively up yourself, shed light on some, perhaps, lesser noticed gems that make this My Favorite World.

But what a fraud! Who am I to suggest to anyone how to lighten the burden? Where does this Grumpy Gus get off chirping about MFW and cherishing the gems of culture as a shield against the darkness.

Because here's the the thing that I've been missing: Joy. It is staggeringly difficult for me to find true joy right now. Moments of contentment, perhaps, even moments where I almost fully forget the looming terror and disappear into a moment of

– is that joy? – only to have it snatched away.

Oh the bitter irony of the person who forgets his own prevailing ethos! Because both the i2b / MFW sensibility comes down to one key verb: Choice. Always has done. Immunity to boredom is a choice along a continuum. Savoring the only world you have to choose from is damn near binary. But it remains: Make a choice. Doctor, heal thyself!

I turn then to an old Guitar Craft adage, the one that suggests when we feel we are not up to a task, or somehow unworthy, that we Assume the Virtue and go ahead anyway. In plain English: Fake it til ya make it.

So without further ado, here are a few gorgeous tidbits from this mixed up, muddled up, shook up world. It's my favorite, by the way. World, I mean.

First up, a master of the Chinese *guzheng*, a 21-string zithery thing that sounds like a room full of chiming twelve-string guitars.

Wu Fei means "opposite of nothingness". And that, I reckon, ought to encompass everything, including the Joy that I seem to have misplaced somewhere.



I first heard Wu Fei at the Big Ears Festival in 2017. Her solo set summoned angels and devils and ghosts, and I've been a fan ever since. Her collaborations range from far edge new music improvisers like Fred Frith and Carla Kihlstedt to guitar virtuoso Gyan Riley (son of legendary composer Terry Riley).

The Wu Fei / Gyan Riley 2011 album *Pluck* is available over at Fei's Bandcamp page for a mere seven beans. Go. Buy.

Until recently, my favorite Wu Fei collaboration was this monstrous Duo for Guzheng and Freight Train. Chaos. Roaring Chaos, at that. And in the middle of it all a stillness, filled with Joy.

Here's the key thing about Wu Fei: Her music brings Joy. Even in the sad or dark pieces, there is joy in the suffering. And nowhere does the Joy shine more brightly than in her recent recording with banjo wizard Abigail Washburn on the Smithsonian Folkways label.

I caught this pair at Big Ears a couple years ago. Because I was ducking in out of the rain for “a song or two” before I moved on to something more something or other-ish. I mean, c’mon. On paper, the matchup has all the appeal of something cooked up for NPR fundraising week by a bunch of market driven pencil pushers, yet another in a long march of pedestrian world music mashups. I, I sniffed, am above such RiverDance-esque manipulations.

An hour later I was still in my seat, my coat still on, tears of sorrow and laughter streaking my cheeks. This was no bit of clever, audience-tested oatmeal. Fei and Washburn have been friends for years, ever since Washburn studied in China, and more recently as Fei has relocated to Nashville. And in the best tradition of pure folk music, they cooked up their stew jamming on the front porch while they tried to keep their young’uns in line.

The resulting album, produced by Washburn’s husband Bela Fleck, is one of my favorites in recent years. It is soulful and authentic and virtuosic and just so damned full of Joy I could just fucking scream. Happy scream.

So Much Joy

Go buy it. And while you’re at it, check out the cover story on Fei and Abigail in the new issue of Songlines, penned by my fine old buddy DD.

And while we’re talking about good old pals, there is nothing like hearing the voice of an old friend, even if he’s telling you stories you’ve heard a million times. Hell, these days, that might be the best medicine of all.

So here’s a kicking little Tiny Desk Concert from John Fogerty and his kids rocking a few old favorites. I especially love the actual baseball bat guitar he uses on ‘Centerfield’. There’s an old joke about Stratocaster just being baseball bats with strings. This one looks really uncomfortable to

play, but it sounds great.

And finally, just because this naughty little ear worm has been deviling me for days, a happy little ditty from 1970 by the Kinks. I was maybe ten or eleven when this came out, and while it took me years to realize what was really going on, I loved it right off. And that's the way that I want it to stay.

Pronoun Confusion is nothing new

Y'all be well and holler if the spirit moves ya. And as always...

LOVE EACH OTHER MOTHERFUCKERS!

It matters a difference.

PS – Click [here](#) for Part 2 of this post, because I forgot something really important that I remembered at 3 a.m. Mea culpa.