A Critic’s ManiPedi Festo

Today marks my second article for Salvation South, the new online magazine founded by my old buddy Chuck Reece (widely known as the founder and face of The Bitter Southerner; more on me and Chuck coming soon to the blog). This week’s feature about young guitar hero Yasmin Williams marks the beginning of my weekly gig riding the SS culture desk. Even if my desk is a half-busted peach crate stood on end in a spiderweb-free corner of the back porch, I am tickled to have this platform on the regular.

My mandate calls for me to cover Southern culture, or culture about the South, or maybe things that are Southern adjacent. That could be music, books, films, teevee, comedy, dance, mumbly-peg championships, Civil War re-enactments, worm gruntin’ festivals, whatever. Add the fact that I can gin up a decent argument for some degree of Southern-ness for just about any cultural artifact you can find and you have a recipe for an absolute free for all based on not much more than the random direction I point my shiny-object detector in any given week.

Occasionally, when space or context considerations force us to cut ideas from the SS article, I will provide some expansion here at the i2b blog. The blog will also continue, at intervals, to serve as my platform for ideas and musings that do not fit the Salvation South mission. Like this ramble you are reading now, assuming you are still there. Hello?

There is an abundance of excellent cultural work on offer

right now, and it is nearly impossible for most people to get their work noticed. There were roughly 300,000 books published and 100,000 recordings released in 2021. Most of the PR oxygen goes to a handful of big names, leaving the small press and indie labels – not to mention the self-promoted artists – scrambling for scraps. This is why you won't read about Taylor Swift at my joint. (For the record, I like her a bunch and admire her smarts and professed values. But she does not need my help.) And don't even get me started on the absurd inundation of video swamping the web tubes.

Too many "critics" are mere hype agents, mostly underpaid scribblers hoping to hit clickbait gold with limp twatwaffling about this or that "must see" or "what *we all* are watching" flavor of the minute. I empathize, but only just. At the other end of the stick, there are the spawn of Bangs poison-penners who live for the snappy putdown, the curt dismissal, or the sneering above-it-all brush off.

(NOTE: Not all critics, just too many! There are tens – yes tens! – of excellent writers and thinkers that I rely upon in my excavations. Who are your favorites?)

Lucky for my readers: I don't have the time or patience to hype the mediocre, and there is way too much truly cool shit on the wind to waste time on a takedown of something I do not care for. (Unless J.D. Vance shits out another book. That guy just pisses me off.) I am beholden to no press agent or advertiser or corporate megamedia conglomerate. Naturally, Chuck holds veto power as Editor; I've never met a set of toes I could not step on given enough time, but I think we are cool here. It really comes down to my taste and my ability to sift gold from an inundation of sand. I write about the things I believe in. Whether my taste aligns with yours is in the lap of the gods.

My primary goal is to amplify the work of committed culture workers who might fly below the most folks' radar, artists and

scholars whose work might offer my readers a taste of that somethingsomething that reminds us that humankind offers an enormous and rich banquet of epic wonder.

Come on and really: Life is hard enough making it through one more day of this mean old world. Surely it is easier to just listen to/watch something familiar, slip into the equivalent of that fuzzy old robe, and just sit the fuck down and rest.

Sure, we all know there is more there there. But who has time or energy to look in the dark corners of the interwebs in hopes of finding something unexpected and excellent?

Turns out I do, because I need the hunt and discovery like a pig needs mud. And since I'm down in the wallow anyway, why not share the occasional acorn or truffle?

I love to immerse myself in the back catalog of writers and musicians I have just discovered, some current, some long dead or forgotten. Days on end listening to the same artist, comparing early works to later, songs re-worked over time, the evolution of the artist's voice…that life could always be so fine. Some people binge Netflix; I binge musicians and writers and have done since an early age. (More on this in an upcoming post.)

Onward.

This week for Salvation South I wrote about Yasmin Williams, a young WOC from Virginia who is breaking down the artificial white-guys-only image of guitar virtuosity. In my lede, I explained one of the personal reference points that comes into play when I listen to music: Shimmer. If you missed it, kick over to the article and read the first 4-5 paragraphs.

Since Shimmer is basically my own new coinage, I emailed Yasmin those grafs for a reality check. Here's our exchange.

yw: Shimmer is an interesting concept as a musical genre. It

goes beyond the more surface level, general musical genre definitions and delves deeper into the qualities of a musical piece itself. Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a genre and encompasses how music can make us feel or remind us of, which is certainly a unique approach to describing a musical genre. I'm assuming Shimmer can apply to any genre, since its definition lends itself to a wider interpretation. I think, logically, everyone would have a different interpretation of what qualifies as being a part of Shimmer, which might make this term difficult to use in a musical critique. However, this could be a good thing as a lot of music criticism focuses on comparisons and not on emotion.

rr-k: I really appreciate the consideration you gave to this. And yes: There will be disagreement as to what qualifies as Shimmer and what does not. Then again: What is Jazz? What is Country? And so on forever….

yw: Yes exactly! But since Shimmer is a new term there isn't a general consensus on what it means yet, whereas jazz and the like have an understood implication. I think this is good though. Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre "box," than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel. Anyway, finally some fresh ideas in music criticism, thanks for this!

rr-k: There is no consensus because nobody but you and me even knows it exists!

yw: Hahaha well yeah.

Two comments in particular stand out for me.

"Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a

> *genre and encompasses how music can make us feel or remind us of…”*

…and…

> *“Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre “box,” than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel.”*

Man, talk about getting it.

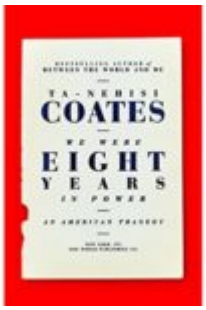
My other big goal for this column is finding a way to articulate the *thing*, that whatever-it-is-ness a piece or body of work delivers that gives me a tingle in my fingers and toes, gives me that warm spread in my belly I used to get from beer.

The driving Question, capital ‘Q’: What is happening when artists give us a glimpse inside something bigger than ourselves and let us in on something mysterious and ineffable?

Shimmer is part of that calculus. I’ll be struggling to find more language, an always imperfect medium for expressing the ineffable, to fill out the equation. Along the way, I would love for readers to weigh in on this conundrum. I am opening comments again here on the blog despite the constant barrage from Eastern European porn and vape merchants. Help make it worth my while.

That’s it for now. Hold the victims of war in your hearts, and hold your loved ones close. While you do that, here’s one of my fave songs of recent vintage. Let’s all be one of these.

America's Virgil



At this point, just about everyone has at least heard of Ta-Nehisi Coates. His second book, *Between the World and Me,* won the 2015 National Book Award. Written as a letter to his teen-aged son, *BTWAM* has sold 1.5 million copies in 19 languages. He won a MacArthur "genius" award. His writing drew comparison to James Baldwin from no less a voice on high than Toni Morrison. He was anointed with dreadful millstone descriptions like "voice of a generation" or, even worse, "the conscience of his race".

Now comes the follow-up, and it's shaping up to be quite the media event. The reviews have been almost embrassingly laudatory and hagiographic profiles of Coates are popping up everywhere. The man himself has been making the rounds of all the high-profile venues. Just last night he sat down with Colbert.

So the burning question. Is *We Were Eight Years in Power* worthy of the fuss?

Yeah, you better believe it is.

It would have been easy to just package a bunch of his *Atlantic* essays, slap an introduction up front, and call it a day. It likely would have been every bit as commercially successful as the more considered volume that hits the store shelves today will be. *We Were Eight Years in Power* collects those essays – one from each of the past 8 years – but instead of one big retrospective introduction, Coates has written an

introduction to each essay, a sort of mini-essay on where he stood professionally and philosophically at the time. Running in parallel to the uber-phenomenon of the first black presidency is the micro-story of a college dropout from Baltimore coming to grips with his voice, his thinking, his place in the world, and eventually, his blazing rocket ascension into his role "as one of the most influential black intellectuals of his generation", as the NY Times recently put it. And then, to cap it all off, Coates offers a new meditation on the rise of the inexcusable Trump, "The First White President", that kicks the hornet's nest anew.

Here's how I'd put it: Coates is shaping up to be America's Virgil, the man of letters who will serve as our guide through the circles of hell built on the foundation of white supremacy, theft, murder, rape, and lying.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate. So let's take a walk, shall we?

The essays alone, arranged chronologically and ranging from his look at the stern moralizing of a pre-disgrace Bill Cosby to the nightmare rise of a dim-witted game show host to the Oval Office, give the reader a tour through a young man's mind as he comes to better know himself, his craft, and the world around. But even better: the new essays give us a matured writer in conversation with his younger self, chastising the flaws and failures and giving us a glimpse of struggles that should resonate with any writer.

One of the great pleasures in this volume lies in witnessing Coates' gradual, and then sudden, development.<fn>2015 alone saw the publication of BTWAM and his Polk award winning essay "The Black Family in the Age of Incarceration", included here. Talk about mic-dropping.</fn> It's as though he gains confidence both in his voice and his thinking in tandem. I wish he had included some examples of his early-years blogging at *The Atlantic* to paint an even fuller picture of how far he

traveled in a ten year span. The blog is where I first stumbled to Coates, and I followed him regularly. He writes about that period, describing it as something of a finishing school, a place where he was able to try out ideas and voices, a place where the give and take of argumentation and citations of previously-unknown writers led him into modes of thought and investigation that were fresh and generative. It was clear that this was a guy with chops, and I remember wondering why he didn't have a two-a-week gig on the NYT op-ed. Even raw, he was that good.

Coates backs up his provocative positions with solid evidence, but nobody turns to Coates for a recitation of statistics. He is one of the finest prose stylists alive. Every page brings at least one passage – a phrase, a sentence, an entire paragraph – that demands multiple re-readings.

At one point early in his ascent, he describes attending a dinner party where someone mentioned the Continental Divide, something he had never heard of at the time.

> *I did not know what the Continental Divide was, and I did not ask. Later I felt bad about this. I knew, even then, that whenever I nodded along in ignorance, I lost an opportunity, betrayed the wonder in me by privileging the appearance of knowing over the work of finding out.*

Raise your hand if you ever pretended to know when you didn't.<fn>You there, in back, with your hand down. You're pretending. That's it. Raise that hand.</fn>

Coates writes at length about the influences that made him the writer he has become. He speaks frequently of his love of graphic novels<fn>Post-BTWAM, Coates became the writer for the Black Panther comic series, telling the NYT that it "satisfies the kid in me" and is "the place where I can go to do something that sort of feels private again."</fn> and how he spent hours playing and replaying certain hip-hop tracks so he

could decipher the lyrics, certain that there was a structure and rhythm that he might be able to unlock.

> *That was how I wanted to write — with weight and clarity, without sanctimony and homily. I could not even articulate why. I guess if forced I would have mumbled something about "truth."*

It's easy to forget that just ten years ago, Coates was struggling to get his words out, struggling (and often failing) to provide for himself and his family. Struggling to find a voice. And grappling with the question of what, exactly, he needed to be writing about, when along comes a skinny guy mixed-race guy with a beautiful family and a very black name to upend the apple cart of assumptions about race. Coates was in the right place at the right time. And he had prepared for the moment, even if it would take a few years of hindsight to realize how fortune had smiled.

It's not fair to say that Coates would not have "made it" absent the phenomenon of Obama. He is simply too talented and curious not to have arrived in some fashion. But just as the fact of Obama created the ground that enabled the ascendancy of Trump, so too did it provide a framework for Coates to both blossom and achieve success beyond his wildest imaginings. In "Notes from the Second Year", which introduces his 2009 profile of Michelle Obama, he acknowledges this turn of fate.

> *Their very existence opened a market. It is important to say this, to say it in this ugly, inelegant way. It is important to remember the inconsequence of one's talent and hard work and the incredible and unmatched sway of luck and fate.*

Revisiting Coates' work over the *Eight Years* in this volume reminds me of how much his work influences my own approach, and how surprisingly<fn>Though it shouldn't be a surprise.</fn> similar we are to one another. Bookish nerds

with a fierce love of music, backed by a certainty that these arts could change the world. Civil War geeks. Devoted family guys who, often, are tormented by a seeming inability to measure up to standards of toxic masculinity as regards our success as providers. And the tie that binds all of us who lash ourselves to pen and paper: the curiosity and fear and drive and futility of trying to transform thoughts into words that sing and dance off the page.

But even with the pleasures provided by Coates' writing, this collection is unlikely to make you feel especially chipper. Beginning with the audacious hope that the Obama era confers, the story closes with Coates pondering the specter of America's "first white president", a man who has achieved the highest office in the land based solely on his appeal to whiteness. In electing Trump, he suggests, "the white tribe united in demonstration to say, "If a black man can be president, then any white man – no matter how fallen – can be president."

> *The American tragedy now being wrought is larger than most imagine and will not end with Trump. In recent times, whiteness as an overt political tactic has been restrained by a kind of cordiality that held that its overt invocation would scare off "moderate" whites. This has proved to be only half-true at best. Trump's legacy will be exposing the patina of decency for what it is and revealing just how much a demagogue can get away with. It does not take much to imagine another politician, wise in the ways of Washington, schooled in the methodology of governance, now liberated from the pretense of anti-racist civility, doing a much more effective job than Trump.*

In recent interviews, Coates has taken something of an absolutist stance: the myth of race and the horrific reality of racism is the one key factor, "the only thing" that explains everything, as he said to Chris Hayes. I swing

between believing this to be a rhetorical gambit – a means of framing the debate on his terms, almost like a negotiating stance – and believing him to be quite sincere in this belief.

I'm not much for grand theories of everything, but he has a point. He poses compelling arguments that the United States, and everything about its financial strength and global power, is predicated on the violent appropriation of black peoples' labor, under slavery and under both the original and new Jim Crow. He is at his most forceful when he challenges America to face its original sin, to acknowledge the "bloody heirloom". And he is at his most resigned when he avers that a snowball stands a better chance in hell.

It's not that Coates does not offer or hold out hope for our future. In essence, the hope lies in his demand that we acknowledge our true history, unadorned by myths of exceptionalism and bootstrappy pluck and all the other fairy tales the nation has told itself over the years.

Like Baldwin (and so many others before and since), he despairs that he will ever see such a turn of fate. Yet he manages a quiet note of hope. He quotes Baldwin:

> *White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.*

The "race problem" lies in America's enthusiastic embrace of the falsity and myths of exceptionalism and of "authentic" (read: White) American working men and women raising themselves through dint of their own merit and pluck. That this formulation rests on a false notion of Whiteness that can only exist in juxtaposition to a fabricated myth of Blackness is the unspoken dirty secret that keeps us all on blindly flailing on side-by-side treadmills, hurtling toward an

illusory destination while making scant progress and never noticing that the rats in the cage next to us are really more like us than we have been led to believe.

For Coates, white supremacy is so foundational to the entire American enterprise that he sees little chance of White America writ large rejecting the premise. It's hard to argue with him, even as it leaves one in despair. In his sit-down with Colbert, he was asked to offer hope for a better tomorrow. Coates was having none of it.

> *COLBERT: I'm not asking you to make shit up. I'm asking if you personally see any evidence for change in America.*
>
> *COATES: But I would have to make shit up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.*

So don't look to *We Were Eight Years in Power* for a pleasing bedtime tale. Coates offers analysis, not bromides. Or as he puts it in what his perhaps the most Baldwin-esque passage in the book:

> *Art was not an after-school special. Art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental. It had no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world. It must reflect the world in all it brutality and beauty, not in hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lies, to not be coopted by the television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.*

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Night

Soon, it will all be over. Hard to believe, but true.

The end.

Denouement.

Fin.

The end of the arguments, the pitched battles on Facebook and in the comments section of your favorite newspaper, the unbridled anger, the long friendships dashed, families split asunder. The embarrassed glances as your neighbor plants another sign for *that* person, that idiot fraud who is going to destroy democracy as we know it, that tool of the special interests whose only interest is in undermining your freedom, your very way of life.

But enough about the race for Leon County Property Appraiser<fn>Which is, in fact, a nearly perfect microcosm of the entire U.S. political circus.</fn>. There seems to be some kind of reality show contest underway to see who gets to live in the Big House That Slaves Built. And it all comes down to November 8. Come November 9, we will either wake up to a bright tomorrow or to the certainty that our polis will soon descend into a scorched earth hellscape upon which once-promising seed will find no purchase.

Here’s my humble prediction: no matter who wins, the entirety

of our electorate will find themselves in one or the other of these mindsets. The rosy scenario, alas, is possible only if MY preferred candidate wins. Otherwise, all is lost. Naturally.

Tuesday will mark the twelfth consecutive Presidential election that I have followed, dating back to 1972, with an almost clinically-diagnosable degree of obsession. In that time, I have watched every major election return – all the way into the late West Coast returns – and every national party convention. Gavel to gavel. Coast to coast. If recognizing a problem is the first step toward beating it, I'm good.

My name is Rob, and I am a political junkie.

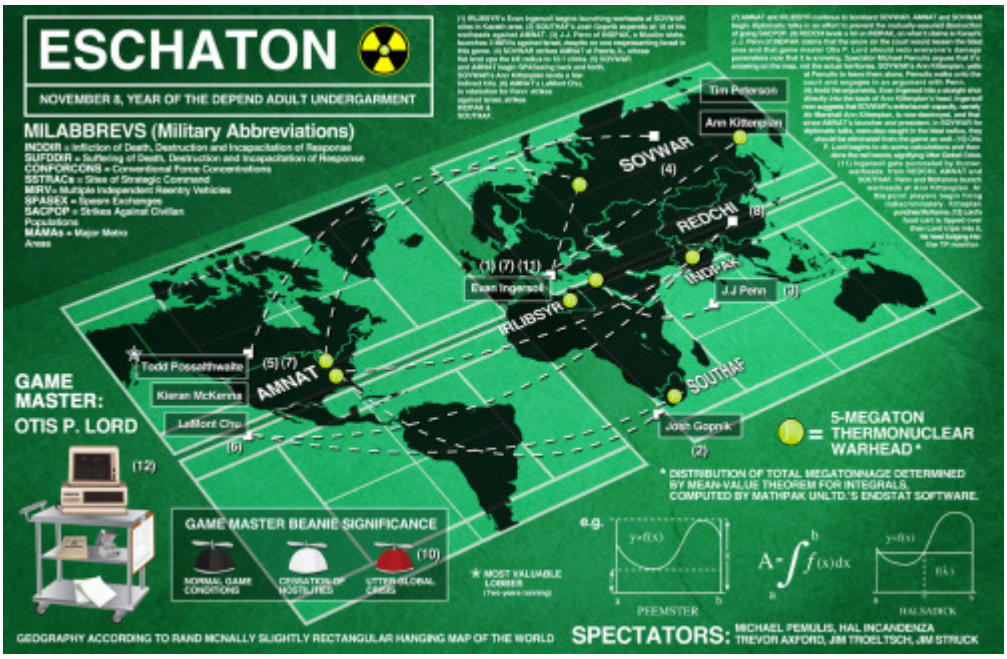
(Faithful followers of the blog [all three of you] have wondered why Your Narrator, of all people, has not written more about the election this year. Short answer: what could I possibly say that hasn't been said at least 7 times already? Also, too: I've had a hard time making any sense of it. It beggars belief, really.)

Anyway, November 8 is a pretty Biden big deal. It is a critical hinge-point in one of the greatest sagas ever told, a day of epic convergences and salient plot development.

I am speaking, of course, about David Foster Wallace's gargantuan *Infinite Jest.*<fn>Available at a fine local bookseller near you!</fn> In lieu of rehashing the obvious and over-determined plot points and characters of the Clinton-Trump pas de deux, what say we resist my electoral OCD and spend a little time on an addiction in front of which Your Narrator finds himself compelled to pay attention to every tiny fucking detail no matter how inconsequential in the larger scheme it may actually be. Just like this fucking election.

Pages 321-342 of *IJ* describe the last, epic contest in the game of Eschaton. This is DFW at his comic peak, his closest

brush with the fiery arc of Pynchon flaring rockets. Eschaton is a game invented at Enfield Tennis Academy in which youngsters with tennis rackets play out a nuclear holocaust scenario by lobbing “tennis balls so bald and dead”, each representing a 5-megaton explosive, on a quartet of tennis courts marked off to represent a world map. Various items of clothing — shorts, shirts, socks, jockstraps — demarcate military installations, civilian population concentrations, transportation assets, &c. Each kid represents a different world power<fn>Or non-power; Canada in particular takes a heaping share of disregard.</fn>, and battle is waged according to strict decision trees derived from game theory, international relations studies, and the ability of said kids to accurately lob a tennis ball onto or into a nation-state and its clothing-represented assets.



It was Sunday, November 8, that this last and final Eschaton contest of all time, a game that had heretofore been a staid and measured contest of skill and strategy, descended into *Lord of the Flies*-esque blood-letting, a free-for-all melee in which propriety and acceptance of civilizing norms are discarded in favor of a winner-take-all-damn-the-torpedos orgy of anything-goes savagery in which anger and vengeance seem to be more important than arriving at mutually beneficial

outcomes.

Sort of like this fucking election campaign. Damn. Can’t get away.

And it happened on November 8. The Day of Eschaton.<fn>To be clear, it was a Sunday, not a Tuesday, this November 8 in the Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment was. YDAU is likely equivalent to our own 2009. Noting that the main action of this novel of a dystopian future is now several years in the old rear-view is as jarring as growing up with, and living past, the years of action described in *1984* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Time’s arrow is relentless in its poking of Your Narrator’s hind bits.</fn>

November 8 is also, in the *IJ* mythos, Interdependence Day, a celebratory occasion that marks the declaration by President Johnny Gentle of the forced union of the US, Mexico, and Canada. Johnny Gentle, a germ-o-phobic lounge crooner cum television star – a man described as having a “pathological inability to deal proactively with any sort of real or imagined rejection” – has defied the odds by winning the Presidency on the platform of, basically, ‘everything is filthy and awful and I’m the only one who can clean it up’. That he has never been bothered by two or more ideas occupying his mind at the same time, or that he has disturbing and obvious sociopathic and authoritarian tendencies, is of no apparent concern to a largely imbecilic American electorate which is anxious to have someone place a firm hand on the wheel.

Forget building a yoooge wall. Johnny Gentle forced Canada to accept a “gift” of a massive swath of land comprising most of Northern New England and New York, a land that will be used as a toxic dump for America’s trash and radioactive waste. The land is quickly rendered uninhabitable for humans, though rumor abounds that giant feral rodents, perhaps descendant of liberated pet hamsters, roam the wilds feasting on garbage

hurled by massive catapults from the south.

Also, too: Johnny Gentle dismantles NATO, ostensibly because they won't carry their own weight, defense-spending wise.

Also, too, also: the mysterious Joelle Van Dyne – aka radio cult personality Madame Psychosis (which we are intended to hear as 'metempsychosis'); formerly-aka the Prettiest Girl of All Time (PGOAT), subsequently a victim of a hideous acid-hurled-in-the-face deformity episode, and currently a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (UHID) – is admitted into Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House on November 8, YDAU.

Of note: JVD is also the featured performer in *The Entertainment*, a video cartridge that is so compellingly mesmerizing and entertaining that anyone who starts watching it will sit transfixed, through episodes of hunger and thirst and bladder/colonic evacuations, until actual death occurs.

Something like this fucking election campaign.

As Pierce noted in a recent post: "Are We Not Entertained?", both camps have pulled out all the stops to capture our eyeballs, from HRC's parade of celebrities we love to watch – like the celebrities currently occupying that Big House That Slaves Built on Pennsylvania Avenue, no to mention A-listers like Bey, Katy, Bruce, &c. – to Trump's parade of Chachi and Ted Nugent and uh, mm, uh…… OK, granted, Trump can't call down the star-power the way Hils can, but it doesn't matter…he himself is The Entertainment *ne plus ultra* of this campaign. He is the can't-stop-looking train wreck that everybody watches just to see what happens next. Some of us are horrified, some of our neighbors thrilled, at the "authenticity" of his antics. Either way, the folks with the teevee cameras know that if they point at him, a goodly number of us will gawk, perhaps not through embarrassing episodes of defecatory/excretory mishap, but certainly in great enough

numbers to keep the camera pointers focused on what we have deemed most important this year.

“So,” you ask Your Rambling Narrator, “the fuck what? I can’t stand this stuff and I *never* watch/listen to any of this crap.” Indeed. And why should you?

(You just know I’m gonna tell you why. But not yet.)

I recently re-read some Joan Didion essays about the 1988 conventions and election – a moment of relative civility in the recurring preznential drama – and I found myself wondering<fn>Heads up! We’re back to *IJ* again.</fn> what was the real-life equivalent of the instant that snivel-nosed Evan Ingersoll snapped to the in-built contradictions of Eschaton’s niceties and agreed upon “apparatus of the game”, which realization led him to drill a frozen rope, line driven tennis ball into the base of Ann Kittenplan’s skull – she representing what we would all recognize as Putin-land – which action shattered the “civility” of old-line Eschaton strategy and unleashed the hellish fury of a full-bore Eschatological melee that culminated with Otis P Lord ending up with an old-school CRT computer monitor fitted tightly over his skull, glass screen side first – pondering how/when/why the norms of “civilized” political battle fell into glass-slivered pieces, looking for the exact moment when our own so-called *real* political culture turned the corner into the lunacy that has us contemplating the actual-if-slight possibility that a spray-tanned reality show host might actually assume the office of the Presidency. Our own Johnny Gentle.

Your Narrator is compelled to consider one of i2b’s guiding principles: Reagan Ruined Everything. Perhaps St Ronald was the metaphorical tennis ball to Kittenplan’s skull?

Consider Ronnie's abject demonization of the word "liberal" and the various schemes and machinations of the Reagan campaign, their dickying the Iran hostage crisis and stealing debate books and barely concealed racist appeals. Is this it? Here, after all, was a man careening headlong into dementia, a dim bulb in the chandelier ascending to the presidency, a B-movie contract hack with name recognition largely derived from his silver screen history. Saint Ronnie indeed left a trail of carnage and terrible policies in his wake. But no, Reagan had at least been a Governor, as had many Presidents before him, and despite his anti-towering intellect and retrograde policy inclinations, he was a legitimate choice for President.

I glance back at *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* and I find myself amazed that History's Yard Waste himself looks almost good in comparison. But no, this was not the moment.

We can think about Willie Horton or Al Gore inventing the internet while he wrote *Love Story,* or the Great Clenis Hunt of the 1990s, or or or….and sure, all these things are contributors to our current debaclish condition, grim harbinger of the degradation to come. But not quite the nadir.

In the end, I think the line drive tennis ball to the nape of

our political neck<fn>Block that metaphor!</fn> comes down to the moment Mavericky John McCain, with the help of his fawning media monkeys, convinced America that a barely-literate nobody from a tiny village of Alaskan meth heads was a legitimate choice to sit second in line to the presidency.

And really and come on, that was the moment where the “apparatus of the game” got thrown against the rocks and our descent into Gentle Trumpery was ordained. Not that it wouldn’t have happened anyway, eventually, that somebody would see the weakness inherent in the politico/media co-dependency and knife that soft-underbelly with almost Stradivarian skill. But that moment when a reasonably sentient Presidential nominee selected a barely sentient snowbilly in 4-inch Louboutins to stand as second-in-line to the Presidency, when the media broke its own back bending to deal “even handedly” with a person who justly deserved all the mockery we could

muster – that was the moment of insemination, the moment the Trump monster was made possible. Because once we treated her as though she were in the least qualified, all bets were off for any future carny act that wanted to play the media like small-town marks in front of a cartload of snake oil.

Compare the amount of coverage of Palin v Obama in 2008. Compare the amount of coverage of Trump v everybody else this past year. The media gazed upon Palin/Trump as do the victims of *The Entertainment* – they are willing to endure anything because the freak show is so damned compelling. And while we may not be down with soiling ourselves, it's pretty clear that we will swallow pretty much anything.

Along comes Trump. The shattered apparatus of the game was no match for a guy who couples razor-sharp media instincts with the morality of a Kimodo dragon. When Johnny Gentle emerged:

> *the Dems and G.O.P.s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other's surely got it, the two established mainstream parties split open along tired philosophical lines in a dark time when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins and sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted, and also, recall, a post-Soviet and -Jihad era when – somehow even worse – there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy and consequent silence, the loss of any external Menace to hate and fear.*

The GOP was caught flat-footed by Trump, struck dumb by his remorseless manipulations of the very same elements the Party had assumed were their personal playthings, rendered impotent by a stable of so-called contenders who were either utterly

content-free, horrifically unlikeable, or both. The Republican party – for all the earnest, very public soul-searching by the very same people who set the table for this Bosch-like feast<fn>Looking at you, Bobo.</fn> – built this damn monster. But unlike Frankenstein's feared and hated creation, the townspeople loved Himself, and turned on Himself's creators when they tried to reign him in. Shelley never saw that ending coming.

One of William F Buckley's notable quips was "Don't immanentize the Eschaton", which was directed at the do-gooder utopians who he accused of attempting to hasten a post-Armageddon kingdom of god. At root, it was just a fancy way of complaining about government intervention in human affairs, but it made the speaker feel all plummy and clever about his (almost always his) disdain for the lily-livered, oatmeal-brained, pusillanimous pukes of the liberal persuasion. I first heard the phrase in an undergrad pol sci class.

But now it seems the equation is flipped. We have the Great Orange Menace casually declaiming "I'll bomb the shit out of them" and other such expressions of policy, much to the great delight of his devotees who are ready to blow the whole damn thing up out of frustration and anger. We have arrived at the inversion of Buckley's concern in which the purported conservative candidate – our own Johnny Gentle – is the one calling for a thoroughgoing cleansing.

Fortunately, and unlike the sad picture of the Dems and GOP as hapless doubles partners offered in *Infinite Jest*, the Democratic Party found itself nominating a candidate with perhaps the greatest set of qualifications and experience in the history of the Republic.<fn>With the possible exception of James Madison.</fn> And barring some calamitous turn, our next President will be a woman – a WOMAN! – who has been preparing her entire life for this opportunity. An opportunity which, one should note, nobody could have foreseen as even remotely possible when Hillary Clinton began her long climb.

This is history, right now, obviously and colorfully unfolding each and every day. It is an amazing thing, this system of governance, with its peaceful transfer of power (at least up to now…stay tuned) and its sometimes maddening pace of non-change, its deference to compromise and consensus, to finding something resembling common ground. It is utterly imperfect. Not watching this would be like not paying any attention to the Civil War or the Depression if you'd been alive then. I cannot fathom the disinterest; then again, Your Narrator is notoriously lacking in empathy and imagination. Mea culpa.

I reckon that within a very short period of time, President Clinton II will disappoint me in some profound ways. In this she will join every other President, including Barack Obama, who I consider the finest President of my lifetime, and one of our all time top 5.

I am damned glad that she is the Democrat who stood in battle with our very own Johnny Gentle. When we wake up on November 9, we better hope (hell, pray if you want to) she took the prize. Anything else is, literally, unthinkable.

Days of Miracle and Wonder

One of the activities that keeps me off the street and out of trouble is serving as a mentor to up and coming entrepreneurs

at the Domi Station incubator in Tallahassee. This is purely volunteer work where I listen to people pitch their ideas and then tell them a million ways they could do it better. Most people appreciate it; some, not so much. Either way, this was their chance to throw rocks my way.

The 1 Million Cups series is a Kauffman Foundation initiative based on the notion that entrepreneurs discover solutions and create networks over a million cups of coffee. Every Wednesday, in dozens of cities, one person stands up and throws a pitch to a crowd of caffeine-fueled colleagues, peers, and the occasional VIP. Today was my turn on the mound.

Your Narrator delivered a scintillating, finely woven tale, peppered with witty asides and penetrating insights. Jaws dropped. Grown men wept. In the distance, a coyote howled. It was amazing. No, really.

But you readers have to make do with the short version. Basically, I was asking for financial support to chase down an amazing story. Essentially, to chase a miracle.

There are several strands at play, like Southern agricultural economics and the role of the peanut in the politics of social justice, largely centered around this man’s story.

George Washington Carver

It’s a story about how African-American farmers, instructed by an African-American researcher, upended the cotton-based economics of the agrarian South by embracing the humble peanut at the beginning of the last century. It’s about how that switch regenerated the soil depleted by cotton (an extremely extractive crop that turns soil to dust) and offered a pathway to self-reliance to people who were still toiling under a de facto continuation of slavery. It’s about the discovery of the superb nutritional qualities of the ground nut, the lowly goober pea, which eventually found its way onto everyone’s pantry shelf in the form of peanut butter and other products, not to mention taking a central place in African-American foodways traditions.

It’s also about a small town, Fitzgerald Georgia, population 9053, a long-time peanut center, which has a new factory for peanut processing that employs around 80-90 people. And how most of the employees are convicted felons searching for a pathway back into mainstream life.

But more than anything, it’s about this little guy.

This child is in the final stages of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM), the leading cause of death of children in the world. One every 8 seconds, around 5 million deaths per year. The kids who survive are typically developmentally challenged – saddled with poor motor, cognitive, immune functions – for the rest of their lives. Entire generations of future problem solvers, leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, &c., are left hollowed out. There are many reasons that sub-Saharan Africa is plagued by social and political crisis. This is one of the chief contributing factors.

The worst thing about it…this suffering is easily preventable. Absolutely curable and reversible.

This is the miracle part. And we’re back to the peanut.

Miracle and wonder

The boy on the right is the boy on the left after five weeks of treatment with Ready to Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), a high-protein, vitamin-fortified peanut paste. At a cost of a little more than a dollar a day, RUTF will reverse the symptoms of SAM and place a young child on a path to normal physical and mental development. The treatment efficacy is in the 95% range. Miracle and wonder.

There are a handful of companies in the world that make this stuff according to a formula prescribed by the UN. One of them is in Fitzgerald, GA, population 9053.

Miracle Nutrition

Mana is a non-profit that is committed to eliminating SAM. It also takes seriously an opportunity to provide stimulus to an economically suffering part of rural South Georgia, and to provide job opportunities for ex-cons looking for reintegration.

It's a big job, and like most important missions, it is underfunded. Mana reaches around one-third of the kids in need. Upping that figure takes money. (One of the stories that I dread, and that is inevitable, is how just a few miles from where we distribute Mana is another camp that will not be served.)

So they had a bright idea: create a for-profit company that leverages the existing peanut processing facility to manufacture a high-quality consumer product that can fund the

famine relief mission.

Funding the Miracle

So Good Spread was born, an effort to harness a chunk of the $2Billion/year peanut butter industry in service to a larger good. We hear an awful lot about Social Entrepreneurship these days, and when it’s touted by the oil companies and such, it’s easy to get cynical. But these folks are the real deal.

Next month, October, Mana/Good Spread is loading up a plane for delivery to Uganda, which recently received around 750,000 refugees from the civil strife in South Sudan. This is on top of a multi-year drought and crop failure cycle that has already stressed the Ugandan food infrastructure to the breaking point. Not to mention an earlier influx of refugees. The situation is dire.

And Your Narrator has been offered a seat on the plane and in the back of the truck. This will mean 8-10 days on the ground in Uganda, sitting in on meetings with governmental and NGO actors, and visiting the camps and relief agencies. What I’ve related so far is the tip of the iceberg on this story. I want to dig deeper and bring this story home. There is already

interest from a few publications, and my pitch this morning has led to potential contacts at some other notable vehicles. My gut instinct is that this story has potential for full book length treatment. It is that big.

But this project will take money, way more than I have. I'll need travel expenses to Africa, as well as resources to pursue story lines in Fitzgerald, Tuskeegee, and other significant locations.

So I'm asking straight out: please donate to this project. We are not going the Kickstarter/GoFundMe route, or directly to granting orgs and foundations, because the trip is coming up so quickly. Direct action, and pleading, is necessary. We are setting up a donation channel through the Domi Education Fund, which will make your contribute tax-deductible. I'm putting up a PayPal link at the top of this page. Please use it. Tell your friends. If you know any philanthropists, tell them.

IMPORTANT: (UPDATED)
The PayPal link leads to a donation form where you can place a tax-deductible donation to Domi Education, which is administering the funds.
If you prefer to donate via check, please remit to:
Domi Education
914 Railroad Ave
Tallahassee, FL 32310.

I need to raise about $4000 to put me on that plane (and the one that comes back!), and around $5000-6000 beyond that to cover research expenses and development. If I get anywhere close to $4k, I'm on the plane and I'll worry about the rest later. Any donations beyond those amounts will go to Mana.

And if you want to skip my project and just give directly to Mana, angels will smile and blow trumpets. I'm good with that. Do whatever feels right.

But since I really want to bring this story home, I'm turning

to my network of faithful readers and pals to do the one thing I do worst: ask for help.

Whaddya say?