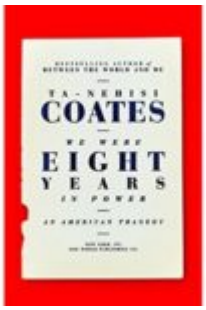
America's Virgil



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.*

Entr’acte



Exposition.

Rising action.

Resolution.

That’s the standard structure of the 3-act arc in theatre, movies, opera, lit, &c. Between each act, there is the interlude known as *entr’acte* (in Italian, *intermezzo*; en Espanol, *intermedio*). It’s a time to hit the head, grab a bag of kettle corn. Or maybe just sit and reflect.

It’s not often that we can observe the clear demarcation of acts as our lives unfold. Nobody turns on the house lights or projects a helpful “Intermission” card on the big screen. No orchestra strikes up a medley of themes to cue a rush to the lobby to get ourselves a treat.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjB5gjTEEj8

Then again.

Some life moments have such innate powers of punctuation that only the dullest mope can miss the signal. Thus does Your Narrator find himself *entr’acte*.

Yesterday, we packed My Favorite Boy off for a year abroad. A year. In Germany.<fn>Perhaps better to talk about either *Zwischenspiel* or *Zwischenakt* instead of *entr’acte*, but I can’t figure out how to pronounce the German. Mea culpa. *Meine Schuld.*</fn> As I’ve gotten older, years fly by more

quickly than when I was a snaggle-toothed, skinned-knee yard monkey. But the coming year looks cruelly long.

That photo up there is emblematic of The Boy. For the next year, he is enrolled in the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program (CBYX). He will repeat his senior year of high school. Only this time he will do it in German<fn>Current operative vocabulary: 8-10 words.</fn>, and maybe in high heels and dancing backwards. Who knows? He will be in a town in Lower Saxony near the Netherlands border. He found, applied, and all but had the scholarship in hand before he ever told us what he was up to. He's always been fearless and independent.

A clearly delineated three-act arc emerges as we hang suspended, Stanwyck and I, between II and III. Like The Boy in the photo, we are a little afraid and shall likely get wet. We have already pillaged the lobby for snacks and cocktails. We sit quietly in the dark, awaiting the curtain's rise.

Act One: Youngsters – children, almost – meet, fall head over heels. Declare themselves dedicated to life as Artists. Commit themselves until death do them what what, exuberantly pledging their troths one to the other.



Montage: Chasing dreams with varying levels of "success". A

dozen years pass, carefree times – more or less. But something is missing. The dilemma: discover the source of dissatisfaction.

The yearning to create a family takes center stage. Hindrances emerge, the fates are unkind. Laboratory experiments ensue, negotiations with the gods of medical science: no avail. Copious pleas to Aphrodite, to Ishtar, to Mithras, to Macha and Marduk – all for naught. Our favorites sink into a slough of wretched despond. All seems hopeless.

But hark! What luminous fortune shines in the distance? Are those blue eyes we see shining from a mythical mountaintop? Our heroes embark, a quest to climb this mountain, to best the demons and dragons, to conquer the traps set in our path. Our child is waiting. We must persevere. We must prevail. We must.

Cut to a military green DCF office bathed in flickery fluorescence. A door opens. In walks a woman<fn>Was it a woman? I think it must have been.</fn> carrying the most beautiful baby ever seen on this earth. With shining blue eyes.

“Who gets her first?”

The world’s unlikeliest and most reluctant father steps forward, arms outstretched.

And scene.



Act Two: We find our heroes trying to figure out what parenting entails. Like almost everyone, this is largely a trial and error process in which we are certain to provide our charges with plenty of things to talk to a therapist about in later years.

But they adapt and start to think they have a handle on things. As the gods abhor hubris, the phone rings and, almost overnight, the Beast know as Bender, aka Bam Bam, arrives. All illusions of having mastered the process are dashed. Cue Thalia who takes her turn as director of mayhem. The audience may now enjoy hearty laughter at the heroes' expense.

Are they laughing at or with?

Montage: Children growing up, our heroes growing old(er), a span of laughter and tears and broken bones and banged shins and and and…
(Staging note: this transpires at ultra-high speed, almost as

if 20 years might elapse in a trice.)

















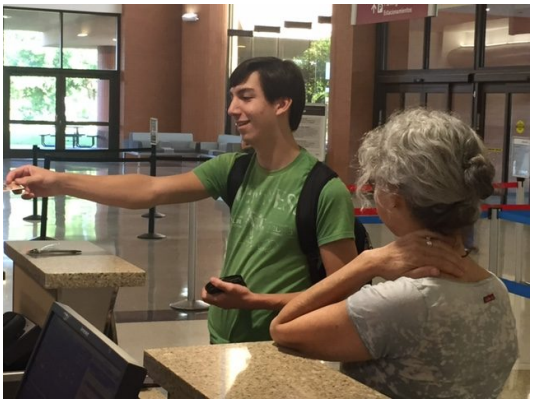




Cut to Daughter kicking every available ass at university. A

science rock star in the making. But, alas, flown the nest.

Cut to the local two-mule airport where a coupletwothree of The Boy’s friends have gathered to offer their fare thee well as he departs for the far off land of Deutsche. For a year. Auf wiedershein.





Voiceover: Andre Gregory’s final words from *My Dinner With Andre.*

> *A son? A baby holds your hands and then suddenly there’s this huge man lifting you off the ground, and then he’s gone. Where’s that son?*



Camera follows The Boy through the security checkpoint. Cheers of farewell follow his progress. Even the TSA agents get in on the action.

Cut to our heroes, proud and bereft.

The nest, it is empty.

And scene.

Act Three: As the curtain rises, our heroes, and their trusty hound Maggie, are in the kitchen. Stanwyck is wearing one of the Lad’s favorite t-shirts. Your Narrator strokes his beard and ponders.

The action is not yet established, the third act not yet written.

We begin again. Constantly.

A Stained Soul Cringes at Small Details in the Mirror of Embarrassment



Woke up this morning, poured a cuppa, and opened the facebook machine. Right there at the top, a photo of the Fox Theater marquee touting the 70th birthday celebration for Colonel Bruce Hampton, Ret. Made me happy to know that so many amazing people -musicians and fans – had filled the Fabulous Fox to honor this half-mad, totally kind genius.

And then I scrolled down a few posts and read the grim news. During the epic finale of this four-hour show Bruce pushed 14 year-old guitar whiz Brandon Niederauer into the spotlight. The boy was shredding. The Colonel walked over and bowed to his latest protege. Then he fell forward, draped across a stage monitor. Classic Bruce antic. The solo continued, the band wailing. The solo ended. Everyone expected Bruce to jump up.

He never got up again.

The music stopped, the ambulance took away the guest of honor. A few hours later, Colonel Bruce Hampton flew away. I've been in a kind of shock all morning.

He was a friend of mine.

Nothing about that is unusual or special, though it does mark me as one lucky son of a gun. Aside from his deep genius and

complete dedication to his craft, Bruce was one of the kindest and most generous cats you will ever meet. He was everybody's friend.

We were friends enough to chat at parties, to enthuse together in the lobby of the Variety Playhouse after a Sun Ra concert. Back in the 80s, my gang of pals went every Monday night to see the Late Bronze Age at the ~~Star Community Bar~~ (might have been the Little Five Points Pub. Memory issues.). It's possible that I've seen the Colonel more than any other musician, easily in triple digits.

He played on Mondays because he always had the best players in his band, and because they were so good they were busy with real money gigs the rest of the week. But Mondays were reserved for the Colonel. In addition to his regular band, all the best musicians in town came out, many of them anxious to step in for a song or three.

My favorite regular guest was Deborah Workman, oboist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Arriving late from ASO work, she would walk meekly on the stage in her formal wear. The band brought the volume way down to let her tone shine through. The first few times, she was timid, nervous about improvising. Eventually, she found her groove and blew like a double-reeded tornado.

Later, the Late Bronze Age gave way to the Aquarium Rescue Unit. You could pretty much count on hearing them at least once a week. And you got to hear young players, "unknowns" like Oteil Burbridge, Jimmy Herring, Jeff Sipe, Rev Jeff Mozier, Matt Mundy. Bruce always had an eye and ear for young talent.

He had the reputation: if Bruce asked you to play, you would crawl over broken glass to do it. Not only would Bruce get you to play your best, play things you never thought of before, he would tell you which book to read, which musician to listen

to, which movies to watch. And somehow, whatever he told you to read/listen/watch was exactly the right thing to blow your mind wide open to get you to yet another level. Bruce moved musicians to find an authentic voice.

Don’t believe me? Ask Derek Trucks.

Later on there was The Quark Alliance, Project Z, the Fiji Mariners, the Madrid Express, the Arkansas Travellers. But it was always the Colonel.

Years earlier – before my time – there was the Hampton Grease Band. Their double album, *Music to Eat*, on the ~~Capricorn~~ Columbia label, was the worst selling major label double album release of all time, at least until Lou Reed came along with *Metal Machine Music*. Time passes. It’s recognized as a classic now.

All this to say that, at least as long as I have been a music obsessive, Colonel Bruce has always been there.

Many years back, after not seeing him for a good dozen years, I received what I thought was a spoofed request from Bruce to connect through LinkedIn. But I answered anyway, and it was really him. He had been in poor health for a while, off the scene for a bit, and he was reaching out to all kinds of people as he started re-connecting.

I was frankly kind of touched that he recalled me at all. But we had a great exchange, and I promised to come see him next time he came through Tallahassee. Something always came up and I never got out to Bradfordville Blues Club when he was there. But fortune smiles! He was on the schedule for both the BBC and Cascades Park this summer. I was looking forward to hearing him and catching up.

It ain’t gonna happen. The guy who has always been there ain’t there no more.

I sit here listening to old Hampton recordings, remembering how his music, his expansive imagination and insatiable curiosity, his incredible presence and generosity…how all these things figured into who I have become. The influence is greater than I had realized.

I'm sad to know I'll not catch up with Bruce this summer. I'm sad that his artistic voice is silenced. I'm just sad, dammit.

But at the same time, what a way to go. I halfway believe he planned it. The last song he ever played: *Turn on Your Lovelight*. You know, the one that goes "without a warning / you stole my heart".

Colonel Bruce was a badass. The man gave his all to his craft for near on 50 years. Like most musicians, he never made a ton of money. He lived for those moments where everything comes alive, and he climbed in and out of crappy vans for decades to find the stage where the magic might, just might, arrive.

He was a pro, make no mistake. But he was much more than that. He was a committed visionary who knew what he was doing. And why. He was a sincere absurdist, a grounded Dadaist, a dyed in the wool bluesman and a lover of space jazz. He was funny as hell and serious as can be.

A couple of decades back, at a party at Terry William's front porch, we talked about a book on the free jazz scene. He laughed when I mentioned the title. I'd love to hear that laugh again.

The name of the book?

As ~~Important~~ Serious as Your Life

The Colonel lived it that way all the way.

Full commitment. No compromises.

Farewell, my friend. I am so much better having known you.

———

There is a fairly recent documentary about the Colonel. I'll be watching it tonight.

The Bitter Southerner Saved My Life



This morning, The Bitter Southerner began their annual membership drive. I command you to click through and offer whatever support you can.

Most of you know that for most of June, 2014, I was in a hospital bed, laid up like a beached whale and experiencing the most delightful and disturbing episodes of hallucination and dementia. And then, suddenly, all better, except for the inability to walk more than a few steps at a time, or think about one idea for more than ten seconds, or even stay awake through the day. I was, to be medically technical about it, all kinds of fucked up.

About 18 months ahead of this apocalypse, I had reconnected with Chuck Reece via Facebook. I had known Chuck back in the University of Georgia days, where he was editor of the student

paper and I was general manager of the student radio station. I wrote a few articles for the paper. We weren't tight, but we knew each other well enough to engage a good-natured media rivalry and to give each other shit about this thing or that when our cups had been emptied a few times. But time marches and people drift.

About a year after we reconnected, Chuck and his gang launched The Bitter Southerner. I was knocked out, by the concept, by the execution, and mostly, by the sheer ballsy audacity of the whole affair.

And I was more than a little envious. Damn, thought I: this is about putting it on the line and creating a life that makes getting up in the morning something to look forward to.

By this time, I had found myself in the pinschers between gray hairs and creative economic disruption. I was, essentially, unemployable. My long and storied career stringing words together to make the world a better place for software manufacturers or insurance tycoons was deader than Trump's dick. I had never taken the plunge to play music for a living. I had never, despite my early ambition, become a real Writer with a capital 'w'. I was a has been who never had been.

To make the cliche complete, I was depressed and beaten and certain that everyone else had the puzzle figured out. People like Chuck. They had it going on. Yeah.

Then that damn tick knocked me flat.

One night that August I was home alone, moping, lying in a dark room staring at nothing, and I saw the entire saga of my apocalypse formatted on the ceiling. I up and hobbled to the computer and started writing. And lo, it was lame and flabby. And glorious and funny.

I was still reading Bitter South every week. It never dawned on me that I would write for BS, but it did strike me that, if

they could publish one great story a week, I could commit myself to post one story – as best I could – every week, too. So started this bloggy outpost. It paid poorly (still does), but I had a reason to look forward to waking up each morning.

I actually went one step beyond: I committed to two stories a week for a year. I made it about 40 weeks before I missed a week. I had a good reason, though.

I had an assignment for the Bitter Southerner.

Chuck had mentioned that they had not run anything on jazz in the South yet. Might I be interested? After a few months of telling myself that such a thing was way out of my league, I came up with an idea. I drove to ATL and met Chuck – for the first time in ~~~ years – at Mary Mac's. Over a customary lunch of meat and three, I pitched.

"Sold."

Damn. Well now I was well and surely fucked, destined to exposure as a fraud or worse. I set to work, over the next four months, to write Kosher Gumbo, an epic tale of how NOLA brass band music and Eastern European klezmer music came together under the banner of the Panorama Jazz Band. Plus a few other necessary digressions and diversions.

I wrote and wrote, researched, traveled to NOLA three times, and joined a Mardi Gras krewe. I marched, costumed as Donald Trump. The story went deeper than I had imagined. In the end I had 16,000 words. I cut it to 14,000 and sent it to Chuck, certain of its rejection. I mean really, who runs 14,000 word articles? John McPhee gets that kind of space, and let me tell ya, sister, I am no John McPhee.

I was wrong. Chuck loved it. And even better, he liked it the way it was and did not want to trim it. It ran on Mardi Gras Day, 2016, the longest story the Bitter Southerner has ever run. "Or ever will," sez the editor every time I talk to him.

I was a Writer. Capital damn ‘w’.

What next, then? Well, if you’re a Writer, you better write, fool. It only took me 57 years to figure that one out.

There’s a novel underway. (Maybe two.) A few short stories submitted (and rejected). The blog hobbles along. The Uganda famine relief project has hit some roadblocks, but we’re still hoping.

Last night, I submitted my latest to Bitter Southerner. If they run it, it will be my fourth article for them. I’m like the Alec Baldwin of BS. (See here and here for the other two rambles.)

Ladies and gentlemen: I am a Writer.

I won’t say I owe it all to Chuck and BS. But credit where due: The foolish leap of faith the BS crew took to birth their beast gave me the inspiration to launch this bloggy vineyard. Then Chuck took another leap and put my work in front of a real audience. And then again, and again, and now, maybe, another time. (And beware, Chuck…I have another dozen pitches in my pocket.)

So damn right Bitter Southerner saved my life.

Go give them all your money. It matters a difference.