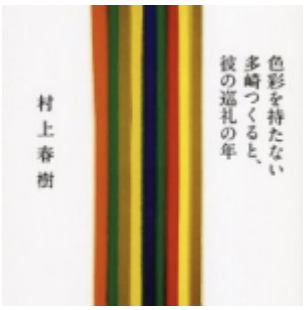
My Favorite World #24



It’s book week at MFW!

Two great reads under my belt in the past few days – Walter Mosley’s *Debbie Doesn’t Do It Anymore* and Haruki Murakami’s *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. Coming off a failed attempt at Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, it was a relief to pick up a couple of winners.

I just finished the Murakami this afternoon, and it pushed all my buttons. Deeply felt, beautifully written<fn>If the translator is to be believed.</fn>, and paced like a slow walk in the woods. Tsukuru is a 36 year old man who suffered a terrible sadness at age 20, nearly died (or attempted suicide) as a result, and has lived a dull and hermetic existence ever since. The book is his long-overdue journey to understand (or not) and come to (or not) a sense of acceptance. It seems that Murakami’s lifelong project is to try to make sense of loneliness and alienation, and in this book it’s no longer buried under metaphor; the loneliness is front and center this time.

It’s almost a trademark of Murakami to focus on a disaffected, emotionally frozen protagonist. He’s done it often, and well, but it never feels as if he has settled into formula, from Toru Okada in *Wind Up Bird Chronicles* to Kafka Tamura in *Kafka on the Shore* to Tengo Kawana in *1Q84*. Tsukuru is similar to these characters, but distinctly his own man, no small irony with the central conceit of the novel asserting that he is inherently bland and colorless.

The ending<fn>Which I loved!</fn> leaves many questions unanswered, and as I approached the end and realized this was to be the (ir)resolution, the sense of warmth and affection I felt for Tsukuru multiplied itself. Some people hate the unresolved ending, but I'm not one of them.<fn>Please refer to the Legal Disclaimer at The Immunity Manifesto for details.</fn> I loved the ending<fn>Yes, loved!</fn>, one of the most satisfying book closings I've enjoyed in years.

Previous Murakami novels include *Kafka on the Shore*, *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle,* and *1Q84*. I loved them all, and there are many more waiting for me. He's hugely popular in Japan; *Colorless Tsukuru* sold over 1 million copies in the first week of release in Japan. He's worthy of the hype.

(btw, my daughter's English class read *Kafka on the Shore* last year. I was pretty excited about this and I re-read it along with her. But at some point in the reading, one of the students told her mother that there was s-e-x in the book. Said mother stormed into the school and demanded that they stop teaching the book. Sadly, the school caved. I remain furious with this meddlesome, bible banging rube. Definitely *not* a contributor to My Favorite World.)

There are some similarities between *Tsukuru* and *The Goldfinch*. The protagonist in each book suffers a traumatic emotional episode as a teenager. Both books explore in great detail the interiority of the main characters, and do so at a slow, nearly glacial pace. Yet *Tsukuru* was so compelling I read the full 400 pages in less than two days; with the *The Goldfinch,* I could not wait to put it down every time I picked it up, and after 200 pages over two weeks, I finally couldn't stand another word of it. I can't put my finger on why, necessarily, other than I experienced Tartt's writing as slooow for the sake of being slow, almost like a technical demonstration.<fn>Watch me! Watch me!</fn> With Murakami, the slowness had a forward rhythm to it that gave me the sensation of living inside Tsukuru's insular and measured world; it felt

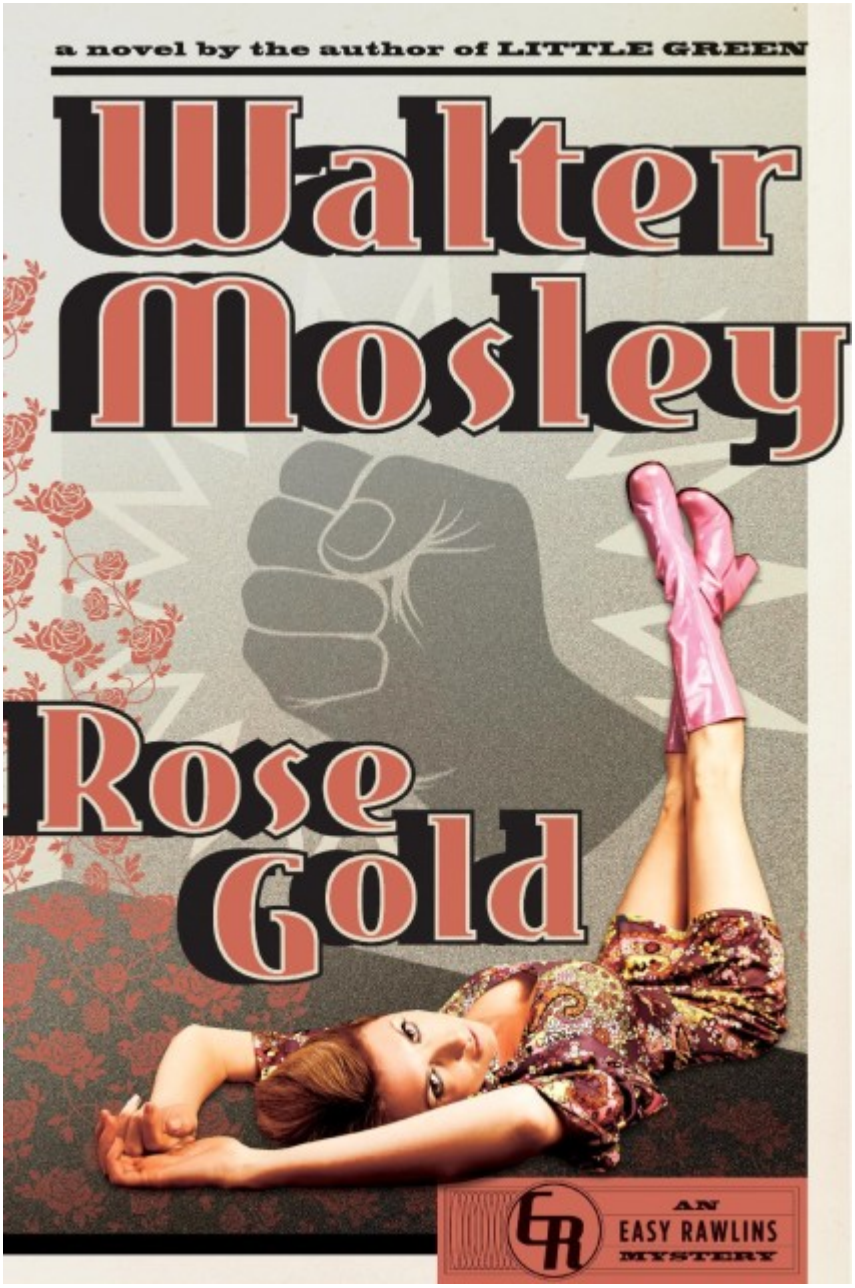
like an organic aspect of the experience rather than a parlor trick.<fn>I realize I'm in the minority on *Goldfinch*, and do not suggest that if you liked it you're wrong or anything like that. I might actually have liked it at another moment in my life. Books are funny that way.</fn> End of crappy comparative lit exposition…read the Murakami. You'll be glad you did.



Walter Mosley continues to amaze. He's written more than 45 books, and I've read around 30 of them. None have made me feel like I wasted my time. *Debbie* is about a porn megastar in L.A. who decides to make a break from the business. Mosley gets deep behind her character's motivations and history; we get a real sense of Debbie as a person, not just, as she puts it, "a set of orifices on the screen". Add to that a suspenseful plot and Mosley's mastery of language and sly sense of humor…well, it's a quick read and a winner. And as always, Mosley uses his characters and plots to examine the dynamics of life as an African-American.

Sitting at hand is the latest in Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, number 13. Like most of his fans, Rawlins is where I first got

to know Mosley, starting with *Devil in a Blue Dress* in the early 90s. Unfairly, this series about an accidental LA private eye in the post-WW2 era got Mosley pigeon-holed as a mystery/crime writer<fn>A genre I truly love, btw.</fn>, but he is so much more. Rawlins is the author's eyes and ears, showing and interpreting the post-war experience of African-Americans in Los Angeles.<fn>Think *Chinatown* from the perspective of the black community.</fn> The plots and mysteries are always top notch and keep you on the edge of the seat, but they are in some ways incidental to Mosely's central project – an exploration of the political and cultural factors that served to define the dimensions of what it means to be Black in White America, and what that means to his primary characters.



So I read the first couple of pages of *Rose Gold* and began to think I should go back and re-read the series before I read this one<fn>I first read *Devil in a Blue Dress* about 25 years ago.</fn>, just binge it like a Netflix series. I have a huge stack of reading on my nightstand, so this feels like a scary commitment, but it might be time to re-visit the origins of Easy and Mouse and Jackson Blue.

By 1995, Denzel Washington used his clout to get *Devil* on the screen. In a sane world, this should have been a long-running franchise, but leave it to Hollywood to fuck up a perfectly good crowbar. Still, the movie remains memorable as the first

time I laid eyes on this guy.<fn>Not entirely true. It turns out I'd been watching him for a few seasons in a better-than-average tv series called *Picket Fences*, but he was so completely transformed in *Devil* that I didn't realize it for a while. One night while watching him play the quiet, dapper DA in the show, it hit me. His great career is no surprise…the guy had chops from the start.</fn>



Don Cheadle as Raymond "Mouse" Alexander

This was Don Cheadle's breakthrough, as Easy's best friend Mouse. A homicidal criminal and true blue friend, Mouse is one of my favorite characters out of any book. Denzel was great as Easy, but Cheadle just nailed this role. You literally can't look away when he's on screen. He is absolutely one of the My Favorite World all-stars.

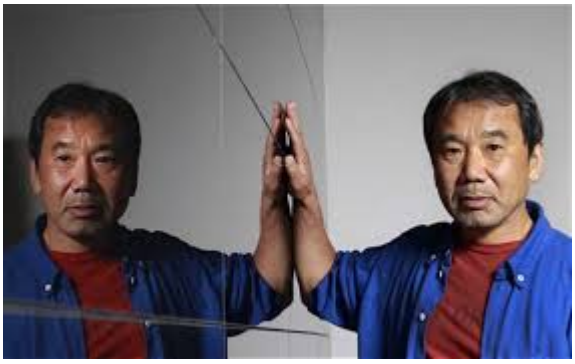
All this leads me to think I should also re-read *The Man in My Basement*, which is my favorite Mosley to date. And that leads to the Socrates Fortlow and Leonid McGill books, and his sci-fi novels and stories, and, and, and. He has demonstrated time and again that he transcends the crime writer straight jacket.<fn>Hell, *Man in my Basement* is way closer to Chekhov

than Chandler.</*fn*>

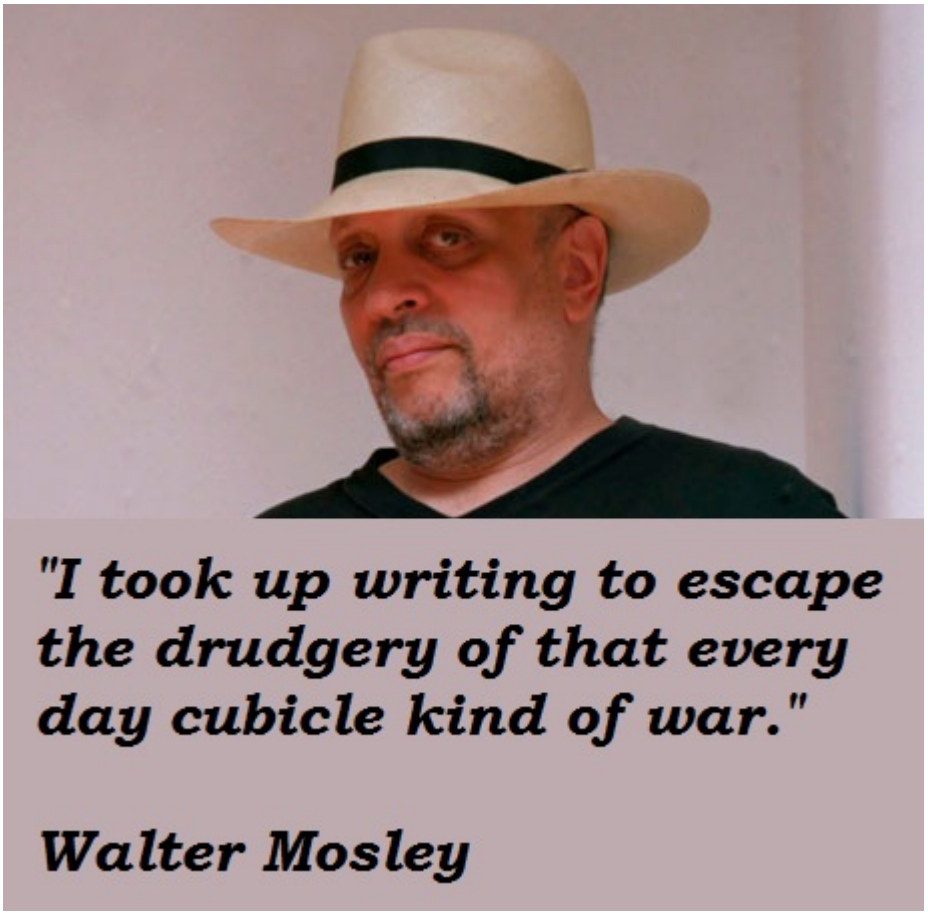
Seriously, 45 books in 25 years. That’s some badassery right there.

So to sum it all up….

Haruki Murakami:

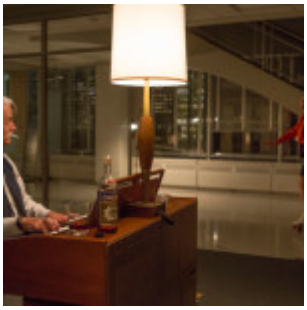


Walter Mosley:



My Favorite World.

Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #1



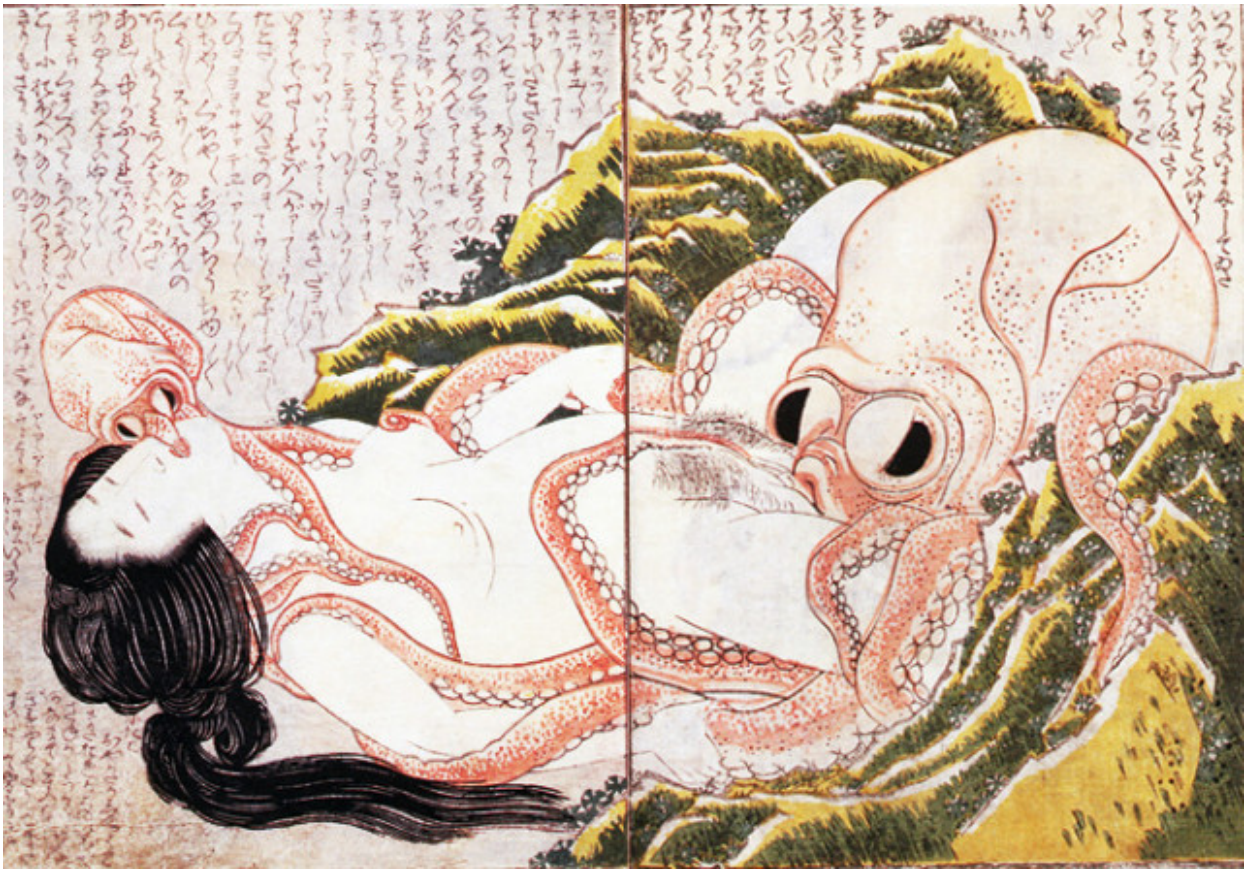
SPOILER ALERT: Mad Men Season 7 spoilers below.

One of the best novels I've ever read is almost at an end. This book sits on a list that includes *Les Miserables*, *Infinite Jest*, *Catch-22*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire.* Yeah, programs from the electric picture radio make the list.<fn>Wanna make something of it?</fn> If I were to include short story collections, I'd mention *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*, Chekhov, and Raymond Carver.

Last night I watched the 3rd-to-last episode of *Mad Men*, and out of seven seasons, that image above is one of the most evocative and cool and resonant and hallucinatory and plain badass moments of the entire book. The bare bones of the abandoned SC&P office; the closest thing left we have to play the grand patriarch, albeit thinly represented; and Peg of our Heart casting it all to the wind, drunk and roller skating through the ruins as Roger plays *Hi-Lili, Hi Lo* on a cheesy organ – the whole sequence felt like that revelatory acid trip moment where you *really, really see, man*.

Roger, the Pale King, grants the princess in disguise a token of power from the One True Patriarch in the form of an antique Japanese porn print (Lear and Ran meeting nicely). Peggy

recoils; *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* is not the kind of art a nice Catholic girl would hang in her office.



Peg is an ace copy writer, or as we prefer to be known, cunning linguists.

And then, the best piece of Roger-Peggy dialog in the whole damn book:

> *"You know I need to make men feel at ease," she says.*
>
> *"Who the hell told you that?" Roger replies.*

Who told her that? Joan, the dethroned Queen Bee, back in the very first episode – 7 years ago in our time, 10 years ago in Mad Men time. Peg takes this advice to heart, this blessing of the dwindling patriarch to go and be as badass as she can muster. And while I thought I'd never enjoy an image of Peg as much as the drunken roller skating, I was wrong. Here we see her here striding the halls of McCann like a colossus, brandishing her cigarette and Asian porno like a sword and

shield.



Warrior Princess

This is a woman who has run out of fucks to give, and who has the internal strength to not have to give them anymore. The sequence plays beautifully, rendered in slow-mo as the white collar drones stumble over their feet trying to get out of her way.

Like the best books of my life, I want *Mad Men* to slow down as we approach the end. I can't wait to find out how it ends<fn>Though given their history of landing the biggest blows 2-3 episodes *before* the season finales, we may already know. For example: Joan told Peg in the first episode years ago to defer to men; she now knows she doesn't need to. I think it means we've seen the last of Peggy. She's done here.</fn>, but I also can't stand the idea that we won't get to follow the characters beyond the final page.<fn>Not that I want anything to do with sequels, prequels, spin-offs, board games, *Mad Men*-labeled scotch or filterless cigs, &c.</fn>

And yeah, it's a novel. It's as textured and considered and layered as any great novel. People have derided it<fn>To my face!</fn> as nothing more than a soap opera, as though many

of the greatest pieces of literature don't also fit that description.<fn>Paging Emma Bovary and Countess Olenska.</fn>

There are more fully realized characters here than in most great novels, and more than a few secondary characters rendered with greater depth and sympathy than most books/movies/ tv shows can muster for their central players. The detail accorded fashion and cultural context are damned near encyclopedic, on par with Hugo's description of the Paris sewers or DeLillo's shot heard round the world baseball game chapter in *Underworld*.

One thing *Mad Men* delivered that's really striking is the sense that, even when characters are not on-screen for weeks (or years!) at a time, when they re-appear we get the sense that they have actually been *living* the whole time they were away. This is an impressive achievement, and one that not many of our favorite novels can deliver.<fn>e.g., even the implacable Javert seems to have been sitting on a shelf whenever we are not with him on the page.</fn>

And maybe even more pertinent to Your Narrator: I know these people. I lived in the NY suburbs during this period. My Dad was a marketing exec, right at the edge of the Madison Avenue gaggle. I recognize the bosses, the underlings, the sycophants. I know the secretaries whose job description included remembering the boss's kids' birthdays; to recognize their voice on the phone; to 'take care' of us when we visited the skyscrapers at inconvenient moments. I wore the pajamas that kid wore, and I had some of the same toys, and the houses looked that way, and the moms and dads acted that way. The clothes and cars and hairstyles and music all changed the way we see it unfold in this book.

And then one day, they sit you down and tell you that mommy and daddy aren't going to live together anymore, but don't worry because nothing really is going to change and they both still love you very much and the earth opens up because you

know it’s sugar-coated bullshit even if you’re too young to even know that word.



That’s me, second from the left. I swear I had that same shirt.

> *Don: “I’m not going, I’ll just be living elsewhere…”*
>
> *Sally: “That’s GOING, you say things and you don’t mean them, you can’t just do that!*

I can attest to the veracity of the dialogue, the setting, the emotion, the whole package. No cluster of words on a page has ever devastated me more than watching this scene of this “soap opera” on the idiot box. I don’t remember any printed words causing me to explode into broken-hearted sobbing like this one.<fn>The death of Gavroche Thénardier on the barricades caused me to burst into tears. But no heart-tearing sobs.</fn> (For that matter, I rarely laugh out loud while reading, but often do so while watching tv or movies.<fn>That Your Narrator may be an unwashed Philistine is a question disposed of quickly. He most certainly washes.</fn>)

So does the electric picture radio matter? Since I casually name-dropped Emma earlier, let's hear from her on the delights of reading:

> *"You forget everything. The hours slip by. You travel in your chair through centuries you seem to see before you, your thoughts are caught up in the story, dallying with the details or following the course of the plot, you enter into characters, so that it seems as if it were your own heart beating beneath their costumes."*

Television at its best delivers the same experience. Sure, it serves up some weak sauce, but we don't let Bulwer-Lytton or 50 Shades of Grisham keep us from the pleasures of [insert your favorites here]. The long-form format – especially on cable – enables stories that can contain Tony Soprano and Omar and Al Swearingen and Frank Pembleton, with characters and storylines that put to rest any argument that television cannot be as profound and *literary* as books.

It's a fair bet that I'll write more about *Mad Men* as time goes by. I'm going to take a break for a while and then re-read it, just like my other favorite novels.

A Walk Down the Garden Path



nos·tal·gia

nä'staljə,nə'staljə/
noun
1. a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.

Nostalgia is a great way to escape the present. And despite a few half-hearted attempts at addressing the latest episodes of state-sponsored violence and racial disparity, your Narrator finds that refuge irresistible right now. A sharp observer with keen understanding and insight could make sense of recent events playing large in the news. I'm not that guy, so if that's your desire, I recommend this recent piece from Ta-Nehisi Coates and this one from a year ago. He puts a bow on a package that too many people are afraid to unwrap.<fn>In fact, you really could just skip my meander down memory lane and deal with Coates. And I'll say again: that Coates is not twice-a-week at the NY Times while mendacious hacks like David Fking Brooks and Ross Cardinal Douhat are gainfully employed is a fundamental crime. Never mind the demented harpy Dowd. But I digress.</fn>

I spent last weekend in Atlanta, mostly in the neighborhood we called home for 17 years. The photo up top is a peek down the garden path to the side of this place, our last home in the 'hood before we decamped for the Swamp.



The Home of Aspiration! The CCA

This former Sunday school building was our home from 2002 to 2006. We lived upstairs in a gorgeous loft-style aerie. Downstairs was home to the Center for Creative Aspiration, a 501(c)(3) arts organization that we established to host a variety of fun, rewarding, and indescribable experiences. See that landscaping? We did that. After we left, the grounds fell into sad disarray, but recent new owners have reclaimed the beauty.



I love that little maple tree.

Also, too…the church next door, which closed right after its 100th anniversary celebration in 2003, has been resurrected<fn>See what I did there?</fn> and is now home to a vital, primarily Africa-American congregation. Even cooler: the downstairs of the church is now home to a 501(c)(3) arts and music organization called HealiUm.<fn>That alone ~~kind of~~ makes this a My Favorite World post.</fn>



Crazy Carl doesn’t come screaming at you from the darkness any more.

As much as I loved living at the CCA, it’s the Blue House that still has a hold on my heart.



I expected to leave this house feet-first. I really thought it was the last stop.

The Blue House is a classic Craftsman built in 1907. We lived there from 1993 to 2002. The first time I walked in, I felt like this house belonged to me.

Standing outside last weekend, I still have that feeling. The current owners are terrific friends who moved from three doors down, because they also love this house. It shows.



Note the little library. My Favorite World.

The library is their addition. They've also restored the floors and much of the original detail. The yard looks even better than when we left. But they had limits.

A few years ago when I drove by they were outdoors and invited me in. As I walked in, I was wondering (and dreading) what they had done to cover the 360° mural Judy had painted in the dining room. This was a very personal piece that featured idealized-but-recognizable versions of the two of us, our daughter (pre-Ben days), and our dogs Starr and Fira. So it was reasonable that the new owners would get rid of it.

Wrong. As they told me: "It's part of the house!"

As I was going all verklempt<fn>Like I'm doing as I write this.</fn>, Liz invited me to look at the kitchen. It was gorgeous, completely re-done the way we would have done it. She waved me over to the door to the basement. And there, with

a completely new and different paint job covering everything else, was the door jamb where we tracked the kids' height with pencil marks…unpainted and unchanged except for the additions of their kids' height markers and dates. They had re-painted everything…except for one side of one door jamb.

I said some quick goodbyes and thank yous and scurried out of there in time to save my meltdown for the inside of my car as I sat looking at this view of My Favorite House.



The view from the back. I love that maple tree.

They weren't home last weekend, but several of our old friends and neighbors were, and we held an impromptu street party, and while I was not wishing I still lived there, I was pretty well washed in the water and enjoying the warmth of both the memories and the present moment.

Both these houses represent some pretty significant moments in the lives of our little clan. Children arriving. Dogs

departing. Concerts played and recordings made. Musicians of substantial and lesser renown from all over the world stayed here while on tour. The CCA hosted 18 guitar players for a 3-month stretch in 2003, thereby guaranteeing Judy an aisle seat in Heaven. Shortly after that, the California Guitar Trio moved in for a 2-week writing and rehearsing retreat. We hosted some great friends and their gang who had to flee Katrina damage, up to a dozen at one point.



18 guitarists for 3 months. How cool is that?

Lots of good things happened there. And for a brief time last weekend, the memories of that time gave me a tremendous sense of comfort and understanding of my place in the world, both then and now.

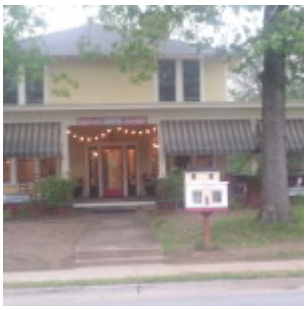
And then I drove home, with plenty of time to reflect. And as I approached my current home of almost 7 years<fn>Ho-leee shit!</fn>, I realized that I couldn’t imagine a better place for me to live now than this one.



Mi Casa, protection provided by Maggie, the Wonder Dog of Wonderment

It’s no turn-of-the-last-century Craftsman. It does not boast a loft-style aerie with a 60-foot long and 10-foot wide central hallway.<fn>The kids kind of learned to ride bikes in there, and it was a great bowling alley.</fn> And it certainly doesn’t have room for 18 guitarists to visit the evening, much less bunk in for three months. But it’s a damned fine place to live a good life. Like anyplace else, whether that happens is pretty much up to me.

My Favorite World #23



That happy little spot – complete with mini-library kiosk – is the Norton Arts Center in Hapeville, GA.<fn>A close southern suburb of Atlanta, featured prominently in *Gone With the Wind*.</fn> I paid my second visit there on Saturday, this time as part of *RoboCromp – Chamber Fusion for a New Millenium*.



RoboCromp – The Band That Refuses to Die

RoboCromp has been active-even-while-dormant since 2004, with two CDs recorded. <fn>Only one released. It is available for a few shekls to the interested. It is also fking terrific.</fn>

We played two sets of mostly Cromp originals, with a few covers from the songbooks of Steve Lacy, Ornette Coleman, Abdullah Ibrahim, and Bill Frisell.



Legions of Fans

Turns out we were scheduled cross-town from an appearance by Marshall Allen of Sun Ra Arkestra fame. A handful of our intrepid pals came to hear us, but to be honest, I would have made the Ra pilgrimage myself if I had not been gigging.

Still, it was a terrific night. My first gig since September, so a bit ragged here and there, but generally a spirited and satisfying performance. There may be a recording, but so far, no confirmation on that. The only bummer is that we had been working a new piece pretty hard lately, and then we forgot to play the damned thing.

Guess we need to keep doing this until we get it right.

Playing the music. My Favorite World.

PS – Eagle-eyed followers of the blog<fn>If such a creature exists.</fn> will have noticed the absence of the Monday diversion this week. It will be along shortly, and before the next Monday diversion is due. Perhaps. No promises.