

WN/MT 6 March 2020  
March thoughts, idle & otherwise  
2102 words



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### One.

**Be cautious** in mid-March, the spirit of Julius Caesar warns. It's not idle advice, for Caesar must have had a tin ear to the political dissent building up around him, or else the mantle of authority made him feel unassailable until he was terminally disabused of that conceit on the Ides of March 15 in 44 BCE. A coin issued by Brutus two years after Caesar's assassination (shown above) celebrated the would-be king's downfall. Before the Ides of March became notorious, that day in the Roman calendar was reserved for religious observances and settling of debts. It so happens that the big settling of debts in American society two millennia later has been displaced a full month in the calendar to April 15 for taxpayers like me and businesses not clever enough to find the loopholes. [Above: Eid Mar coin reverse, the tail side. Below: *Wikipedia*, The Tusculum likeness of Julius Caesar, photographer Gautier Poupeau.]



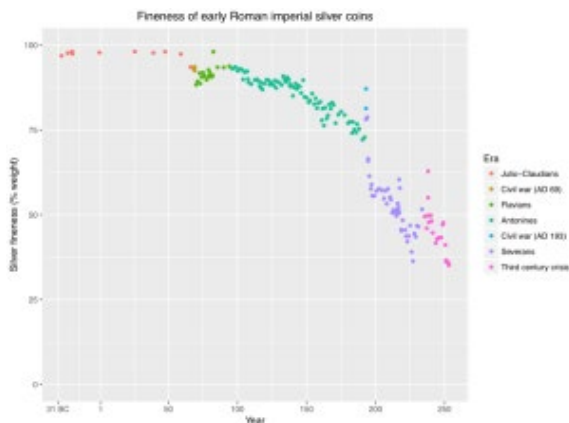
No one wants to be overly superstitious, but it is wise to venture forth with a measure of caution not only on the Ides of March but every day, monitoring your physical and political environments, on the lookout for "hungry looking" Brutuses and watching for reckless scooters,

distracted walkers or drivers, rising seas, hurricanes, fires, blizzards, tornados, or merely uncovered sneezes and coughs. (By the way, why is it socially accepted that we expect ourselves or others to cover coughs or sneezes only when "feeling sick" with a fever? Why doesn't every adult carry a handkerchief or tissue to cover every cough or sneeze - especially in these coronavirus times ?!)

Ancient Roman days were counted differently than they are now, with three named points each month: the *Nones* in the early month, the *Ides* in mid-month, and the *Kalends* on the first of the next month. Assassination perp Brutus issued the coin in the fall of 42 BC, and that Eid Mar denarius shows a "freedom cap" positioned between two daggers. The denarius was the standard coin in the Roman Empire from 267 BC until replaced by the antoninianus in the mid-3rd century AD, the coin of Galen's day. The silver in the coin was initially worth about a day's wages for skilled laborers at that time in Rome, today that equivalent amount of silver is less than \$4. Emperor Nero, about 100 years after Caesar's assassination, began to debase the coin, substituting cheap metal for the silver, until hardly any silver was left by the end of its use. The Eid Mar value, however, has greatly appreciated – a single coin recently fetching 325,000 Swiss francs (\$332,583) at auction on Oct. 6, 2016.



[Above: Eid Mar coin obverse – the head side with Brutus. Below: Silver content debasement by year of Roman Empire denarius and its successors, 11 BC to 250 AD. *Wikipedia*: Data from Walker, D.R. (1976-78), *The Metrology of the Roman Silver Coinage*. Parts I to III. Nicolas Perrault III.]

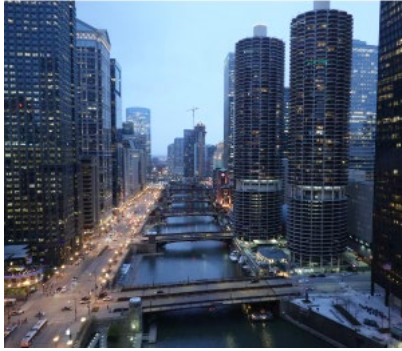


## Two.

**Coffee Houses.** My youngest daughter and her husband, both academics, do much of their work in coffee houses, as do many of their generation. Before computers and the internet, coffee houses were places to meet and converse. Now, it's more common to see people with ear buds in place and eyes focused on their work on laptops and (annoyingly) on phones. The coffee house of Edward Lloyd on Tower Street in London around 1686 was the room where it happened that marine insurance blossomed and grew into an essential component of modern business and life. Insurance was a necessary ingredient in the emergence of the limited liability company, that is, the modern corporation underpinning modern capitalism. Coffee houses have been important social hubs for over 300 years in Western Society and the tea customs in Asia have been around much longer. The Cosy Corner Tea Shop of Mrs. Hugh Cabot opened in Ann Arbor 1923 and became a small part of the Michigan Urology story, with its own backstory of how social changes and the Great War changed expectations for one faculty wife. Coffee and tea houses today serve as primary places to plug into earpieces and computers so as to disconnect from people and immediate scenes around you and leap into distant people, scenes, and your own imagination. Oddly, socialization and social media are not very compatible.



*The Coffee House, in the winter of 1905/1906*, a painting by Alson Skinner Clark (1876-1949), shows the State Street Bridge amidst smoke, fog, and early “skyscrapers” over an icy river. You can barely identify the actual coffee house. [Above: Institute of Art, Chicago.] The title suggests Clark either painted the scene in real time (en plein air) or recalled it from his time in the neighborhood, although he was also an accomplished photographer and may have used that medium to help fashion the painting. The view is not vastly different a century later, the high rises are higher and more numerous, the horsepower of street transportation has increased (without much increase in the transit time per mile), and the price of a cup of coffee has gone up. That same neighborhood these days contains at least several Starbucks and other coffee houses. [Below: State Street Bridge in early spring 2019 during AUA national meeting.]



### Three.



**Coffee beans.** I can't spend too long in coffee houses without recalling the great Danish story teller Karen Blixen, known more widely by her pen name, Isak Dinesen. *Out of Africa* in 1937, described her years in British East Africa (modern-day Kenya) between December 1913 and August 1931. She initially tried to raise cattle, but switched to growing coffee beans although that, too, proved difficult. The soil and high elevation were not perfectly conducive, East African conflicts in First World War interfered with supplies and equipment, and ultimately the Great Depression made the business untenable. Having run through her family's money, Blixen returned to her family home in Denmark to write. Her work there proved far more successful and enduring than the Karen Coffee Company and she became a world celebrity, dying in 1962 at age 77. Orson Wells planned a film anthology of her work, but never completed it, producing only *The Immortal Story* (1968). *Babette's Feast* (1987) became an extraordinary black and white film of a somber isolated Scandinavian village and *Out of Africa* (1985) was gorgeously filmed in color featuring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. Last autumn, while at the terrific CopMich meeting organized by Dana Ohl and Jens Sønksen, I spent an afternoon at the Blixen family home in Rungstedlund. [Above: Photo by Sophus Juncker-Jensen (1859-1940) taken in 1913 shortly before Blixen's departure for Africa. Below: Karen Blixen's home, Rungstedlund, 2019.]



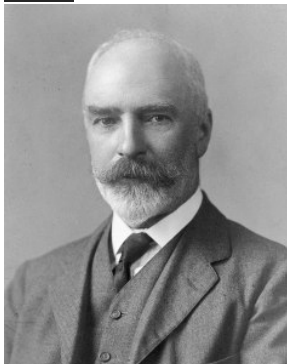
The Isak Dinesen quote that comes to mind after an hour or so in a coffee house is from *Seven Gothic Tales*:

“What is man, when you come to think upon him, but a minutely set, ingenious machine for turning, with infinite artfulness, the red wine of Shiraz into urine.”

Unpleasantly, the name Karen, like many other terms on social media, has become a derogatory meme. [Below: *Wikipedia*: Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke at Kastrup Airport CPH, Copenhagen 1957-11-02.]

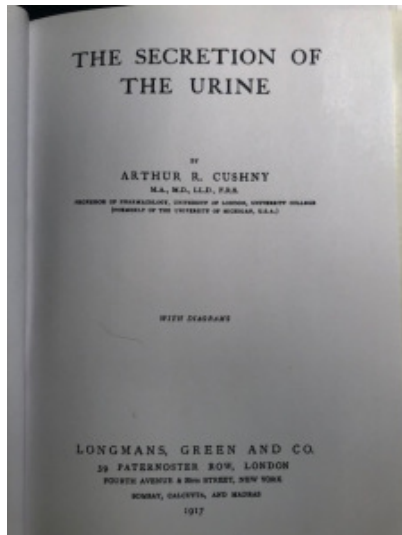


**Four.**



**A book on urine.** In 1917, when Karen Blixen was cultivating coffee by day and telling stories to her friends at night and Michigan Urology founder Hugh Cabot was serving on the Western Front for the British Expeditionary Forces during WWI, Arthur Robertson Cushny, former

University of Michigan professor from 1893 to 1905, was working at University College London when he published *Secretion of the Urine*, a book explaining the machinery and infinite artfulness of urine production. [Above: Cushny, Wellcome Museum. Below: title page.]



Cushny took uroscopy to a new level of detail. Uroscopy began in ancient times with basic sensory evaluation of urine (color, odor, taste, etc.). Medieval uromancy offered speculative linkage of urine findings to diagnosis, and microscopic evaluation later opened new levels of visual detail. Chemical and microbial analysis, using 19th century tools and technology, provided meaningful therapeutic opportunities, but Cushny's book of 1917, *Secretion of the Urine*, explained how urine was formed in health and disease, by filtration at the glomerulus and reabsorption/secretion along the renal tubules.

Arthur Cushny (1866-1926) had come to the Medical School in Ann Arbor to replace John Jacob Abel, a UM graduate from 1883 who had returned to Ann Arbor in 1891 to teach, pursue research, and create the world's first department of pharmacology. Abel transformed the formal and ancient lectures on materia medica and toxicology into pharmacology instruction with demonstrations applicable to clinical practice of his time. Johns Hopkins lured him away in 1893, but that opened the door for Cushny to replace him as chair. Dean Victor Vaughan found Cushny in Berne, investigating the problem of death from chloroform anesthesia and developing methods of titrating the delivery. Cushny was an effective teacher and a productive researcher in Ann Arbor, but returned to Europe for an attractive job as chair of pharmacology at University College London in 1905 and in 1918 returned to his native Scotland as chair in Edinburgh, where he died in 1926. *Secretion of Urine* was a major contribution to physiology and urology. [Cushny AR. *The Secretion of the Urine*. London, Longmans, Green, 1917.]

**Five.**



**You are what you eat**, like most aphorisms, contains truth and hyperbole. It extends easily to other bodily inputs such as you are what you drink. [Above: *The Cook*, Guiseppe Arcimboldo 1570. National Museum, Sweden.] Last month's suggestion, that you are what you read, regarding on *The Crisis* periodical, fortifies a parallel claim for mental nutrition, which came to mind again in another magazine that compels interest, *The Economist*. A recent piece in the recurring essay entitled "Johnson" (after Samuel Johnson, of dictionary fame), combined the recent custom of selecting "words of the year" and the phenomenon of adverse climate change. "Johnson" offered a number of candidates for word of the year, noting that according to the Dutch dictionary Van Dale, Dutch-speaking Belgians voted for *winkelhieren*, a term for "buying locally," as the 2019 word of the year. [*Economist* Jan 4, 2020, p. 62.]

Ann Arbor offers excellent examples for buying locally including Zingerman's and Kerrytown markets for food and stuff, Literati for books, or Camera Mall for photographic things. Amazon is convenient, luring, and addictive but it robs from local communities (livelihoods and taxes). Plus, given the packaging and reported 30% return rate, that particular limited liability corporation accelerates planetary degradation. Perhaps a community becomes what it buys. If people buy mainly from Amazon, they will be an Amazon community as local businesses recede like the glaciers – not such an attractive possibility.



## Postscript x 2: peas and war.



**Gastronomic identity.** In 1826 Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, in *Physiologie du Gout, ou Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante*: "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai que tu es." [Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are]. In 1940, Victor Lindlahr, nutritionist and enthusiast of the so-called catabolic diet, wrote a book *You are what you eat: how to win and keep health with diet*. In strict chemical and physiologic terms, it's hard to deny that fact, although it's nice to believe the human sum is actually greater than the sum of its nutritional parts, as the Italian painter Guiseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) hinted in his arresting works, such as *Vertumnus*. [Above: Emperor Rudolph II as Vertumnus, Roman god of seasons. c. 1590, Guiseppe Arcimboldo. Skokloster Castle, Sweden.]



**The Battle of Columbus.** Just around this time of year, in 1916 (March 9), Francisco "Pancho" Villa's División del Norte raided the small border town of Columbus, NM and retreated back to Mexico. United States President Woodrow Wilson, while holding the U.S. back from the Great War in Europe (that Hugh Cabot entered as a volunteer with the British Expeditionary Forces) eagerly sent 4,800 U.S. troops led by General John Pershing over the U.S./Mexican border to capture Villa. [Above: Unmindful of the Ides, U.S. troops crossed into Mexico in March 1916 in pursuit of Pancho Villa. Photo courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute.] The 9-month



punitive incursion south of the border failed to capture Villa, but it did recruit University of Michigan Ph.D. Paul de Kruif, who joined as a private. The campaign ended in January 1917, without achieving its objective. Pershing claimed the effort a success, even though it seemed that the U.S. soldiers were the main parties punished. de Kruif went on to join the WWI effort after the U.S. officially entered the conflict, serving in the Sanitary Corps as a lieutenant and then captain before returning to Michigan for a short time. His next job was at the Rockefeller Institute until he was fired, rendering him the freedom to become a medical journalist and collaborator in 1926 with Sinclair Lewis in *Arrowsmith*.

Thanks for looking at this month's communication from the University of Michigan Department of Urology. *What's New* is the email version and *matulathoughts.org* is the web-based version.

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