

After a nearly two year absence, **Pawn** finds himself back on the streets of London. Haunting the precincts of Angel this time around.

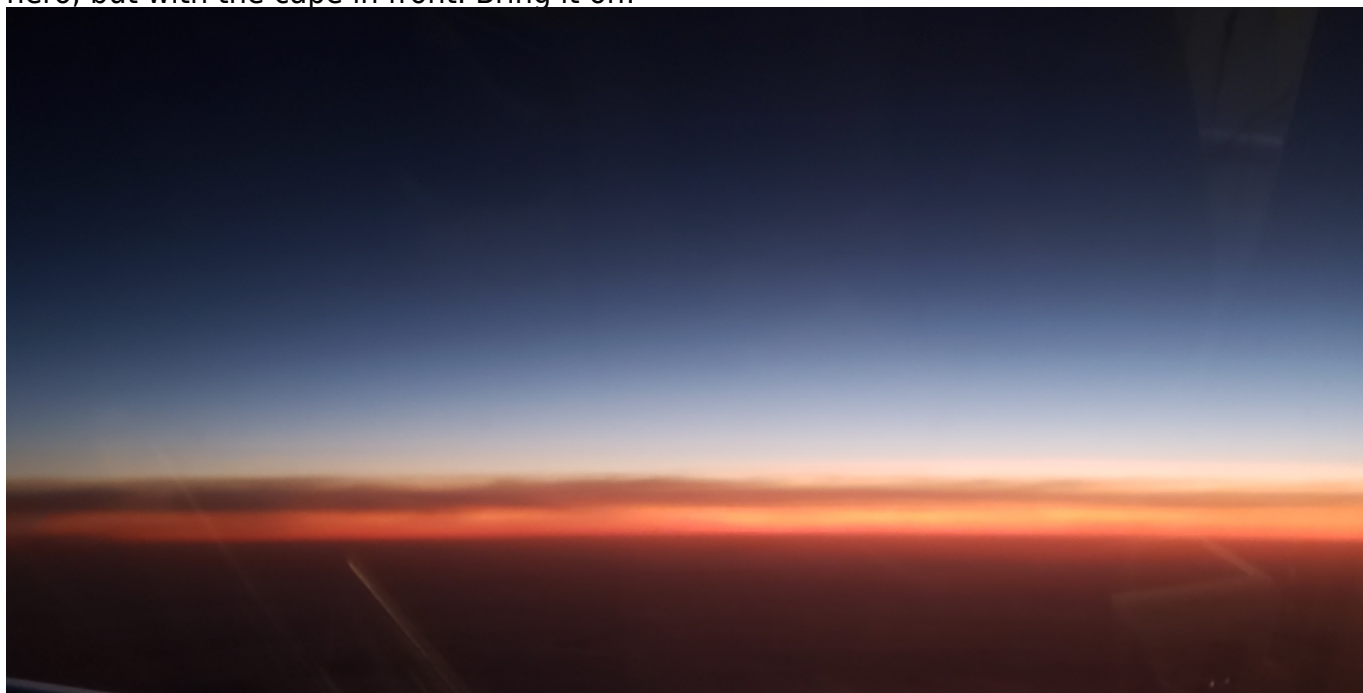
The trip here was both thrilling and frightening. After all these long months of lockdowns, re-openings, new variants, vaccines and anti-vaxxers, just masking up and getting onto public transportation was an act of both hubris and humility.

The bus ride from Milwaukee to O'Hare was fairly uneventful, but the failure to don masks, by the driver and at least one passenger, was daunting. Having opted for a later bus than normal, I had less time sitting in the terminal waiting for departure. Despite numerous entreaties from the airline to file all required paperwork, some passengers apparently hadn't bothered doing so. Two of them claimed to have never been given physical CDC vaccine records cards, which led to pointless anxiety. I don't think those two ended up flying, at least not on my flight.

Prior to departure, the seating charts had indicated a flight near 80% full, at least, but by takeoff we were at less than 50%. Even though most of my cabin was empty, I was seated next to a young woman furiously keyboarding away on her phone right up to the last minute. An enquiry of the flight attendant led to my re-seating two rows fore.

The flight itself was fairly uneventful. People were mostly attentive to masking, and most of them fell right asleep in any event. Mine own mask was a US made N95 of the around-the-head strap variety. While earlier tests had me thinking this one of my least comfortable mask choices, it was actually better than I had any reason to expect. The choice to opt for contact lenses, something I had avoided all my life (my vanity has never rebelled against spectacles), proved key to sanity, as I never once had to contend with fogged lenses.

Dinner was served an hour into the flight, and brought with it a true joy, in the form of a real cloth napkin. Inspection revealed that, indeed, it bore a button hole in one corner. Over the top shirt button it went, and I felt suddenly invincible in a way I hadn't for the entire trip up to that time. Especially in this environment, where I appeared to be one of the few trying to actually replace my mask in between each bite, as dictated by airline policy, I felt protected. Mask on my face, napkin across my chest, I was ready for whatever may come. Like a super hero, but with the cape in front. Bring it on!



Sunrise over Ireland

Heathrow was a more lightly populated version of itself, which was welcome. Still masked up — over twelve hours at this point — I made my way through the seemingly endless tunnels, escalators, conveyors and lifts from the gate to passport control. There have recently been several incidents where the touted automated, biometric, passport scanner-gates have stopped working, for hours at a time. And sure enough, as I approached I could see that fewer than half of them were functional. One of the biggest issues for those which were in use is that they often fail to recognize the faces of those wearing masks. No signage prompted the removal of masks for the facial recognition phase, so most failed to do so. This led to long logjams, and frustrated passengers and gate assistants to an equal degree. The Indian family ahead of me just couldn't get their matron (mother, aunt, not sure) through the gate, so I ended up slipping by them, into a functioning gate, and through onto baggage reclaim, and customs. Next thing I knew I was back to an endless sequence of tunnels, conveyors, lifts and escalators, on my way to the promised land of the London trains. My return ticket purchased, I heard the announcement for my train's departure from platform 2, still a few minutes trudge away. That's okay, by the time I got to the platform it was only 28 minutes until the next. Time spent coordinating with my rental hostess on meeting arrangements.

The train to Paddington was nearly empty. Nine coaches, and I the only soul in coach two all the way from Heathrow to Ealing-Broadway. By the time we arrived Paddington the coach had maybe a dozen people. I shuffled my way through the arrivals hall to the lift to the taxi ranks. There was nobody queued there! This was not a sight I was expecting. Without a queue to suggest where to stand and such, it wasn't really apparent which taxi to approach. A questioning look at one cabby made this clear, and quick as can be I was on my way through Saturday morning traffic, towards King's Cross and past that, Angel. My Irish cabby warned me that Prebend Street, being one of many already pedestrian-friendly streets, was now partially barricaded, making it hard for drivers to figure out the best approach for drop-offs. But his memories served him well, and in a blink I was ascending the stairs to my flat. B, my hostess, greeted me and helped haul luggage up. The flat is nice, with views over a lush greensward out the windows and ample light. My home for the next two weeks is agreeable. A 2 hour nap, shower, and out the door. It's now 1:30pm the day of my arrival, and I am heading out for some groceries. An hour later a short stroll takes me to friend J's home, and the visit is underway.



The view out the windows