

# LEAS LIT

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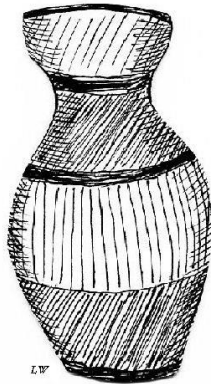
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## THE ORANGE AND YELLOW VASE

**T**here is a vase, which is among my most precious possessions. It is of yellow and burnt-orange ceramic, of generous proportions and beautifully shaped. When the sun streams in through the window on a brilliant day, it spreads its radiance over the surface of the multi-colored clay, and in the mirror-like glaze, I seem to see again Aunt Minnie, smiling up from the stove, and Uncle Theodore, adjusting his glasses, as he changes his focus from the huge encyclopedia to me.



They were both in their sixties when I met them. Actually, Minnie was no more my aunt than Theodore was my uncle. It was just that, in my family, every distant cousin was called “Uncle” or “Aunt” as a matter of course. They had run a bookshop in a small town of northeastern Czechoslovakia. I had lived with my parents and brother in its capital, Prague. In a small

country that spent much of its money on arms production, little was left over for luxuries such as cars. Even small distances between cities were not easily bridged. It was only after the end of World War II that our meeting took place in the Queens Borough of New York City, where we all had made our permanent home.

Aunt Minnie greeted me at the door of their tiny but spotless apartment. Uncle Theodore entered my life with an impromptu statement, which was one of many more to follow.

“Mount Everest is twenty-nine thousand and two feet high. Did you know that?”

“I know it is the world’s highest,” I replied, trying to contribute something intelligent, “but I didn’t know exactly how high. Did you just look it up?”

“Of course not,” said Uncle Theodore, obviously offended.

“I didn’t mean...,” I said helplessly, before Aunt Minnie cut into the conversation:

“Never mind, Theo, Annie is not interested in this now. We’ve only just met her and we want to enjoy her company. Let Mount Everest lie there for a while. Come over here and talk to us.”

Uncle Theodore settled himself obediently in the armchair facing me. His watery blue, slightly protruding eyes stared shortsightedly at me over the gold rims of his bifocals. Large-lobed ears and a long thin face with a long hooked nose gave him a hangdog expression. He was almost completely bald and, at first glance, looked

decidedly old, but his smile, showing large white perfectly shaped teeth, peeled years off him.

“This is such an interesting story about the life of the Aztecs,” he said. “Do you mind if I go on reading? You and Min can gossip in the meantime.” He buried his face in his book before we could answer.

“Aunt Minnie, what have the Aztecs got to do with Mount Everest?” I whispered.

“Nothing at all. He’s always spewing information. You’ll get used to it after awhile. When I first knew him, I used to say, just to tease him, that he knew the encyclopedia by heart. Now, I’d say he can probably recite it backward as well! Ask him to go down to the baker’s for a couple of rolls, though, and he’ll come home with a poppy-seed cake, if we’re lucky. If not, he’ll ignore the baker’s and end up at the library for the rest of the day.”

“With all that knowledge, he must have been a tremendous help back home at the shop.”

“Some help,” Minnie snorted. “In a small place like that, you don’t need a consultant. You need someone who knows where the books are, and who can get them for the customers. Theo? He told them what was in the books all right, every one of them, from cover to cover. Those with a good memory and lots of patience listened, and then walked out saying they didn’t need to buy those books anymore. Those with little patience walked out saying if they’d wanted to go to a lecture, they’d have gone to one. So, when it came to selling books, guess who had to be there?”

“During those years, did you have help in the house?” I asked.

“Of course, while Frank and Lou were little, I had to have someone to clean the house and look after them. Later, when they started to go to school, I looked after the house and the shop, while your Uncle Theo kept improving his education at libraries and museums.”

“And after you came to America?”

“No more bookshop, no money. For awhile, I did housecleaning, six days a week, and on Sundays, I cleaned our own home. Later some friends got me secretarial jobs, and now I’ve quite a steady income from translations I do at home. The boys are both abroad. Of course, they help us out financially. Frank is quite a big man in the field of education. He lives in London. Lou is a good businessman. Has a small export concern, Down Under, in Melbourne. Frank and Lisa have two boys, six and nine years old. Lou and Jill, no family, so far.”

“And Uncle Theo? How did he adjust to the new life?”

“Oh, no problem. You can hardly beat New York for libraries, galleries and museums. He’s in his element. Makes the most of it, too. Has breakfast at home, takes a packed lunch, and gets back in time for dinner. It’s kept him young, don’t you think?”

Except for his skinny wrinkled face, I had to admit she was right. Uncle Theodore’s trim figure could have belonged to a much younger man.

“It’s not what you eat,” sighed Aunt Minnie. “He could gulp whipped cream by the bowlful and drink hot



chocolate with every meal, and not gain an ounce. I don't eat much, and look at me!"

Aunt Minnie just got by. Another fraction of an inch and "Extra Large" would have been too small for her. As she walked, her excess fat, unsupported by her average bone structure, shook like semi-liquid gelatin dessert, and her face, once pretty but now somewhat marred by lines of bitterness around her mouth, was almost hidden by her unsightly frame. In spite of what she said she ate quite a copious meal and I was never able, then or later, to go along with her assertion that her eating habits were Spartan.

I had been watching Uncle Theo furtively. Had he heard some of his wife's unflattering comments? He did not seem to be listening; he turned pages frequently and appeared totally immersed in the complexities of Aztec life.

"Doesn't Uncle have a job? Is he sick, or something?"

"Or something, perhaps. Sick, no. Never had a day's illness in his life. Never had a job, either. We don't spend much, and the boys send something every so often. It's okay."

After that first visit, I became their regular guest. Most of the time, I found Uncle not at home, engaged in some pursuit of knowledge. "Was it always like that?" I once asked Sue, another cousin my age.

"Not quite, at first. You see, the shop was Theodore's. He'd inherited it. When I was a little girl, he used to help out there. He wasn't married then. When

Minnie married him, so mother told me, he was supposed to be a 'catch,' plenty of money, intelligent and all that. Gradually, Theo became more interested in the shop's contents than in running it. Minnie assisted him right from the start. She was so capable and organized she soon had everything at her fingertips. Theo did less and less as time went on.

"Do you ever get time to read?" I asked Aunt Minnie one day, as I watched her coping with the work around the house.

"Yes, of course, I like to keep up with the news, and with the way the world is going."

I must have looked astonished, for she added:

"There's really nothing to it. The apartment is small. I get through my office work during the morning, and the housework by mid-afternoon. Theo's never home, so he's not much trouble. I wonder where he is now. He's usually back long before this."

Two hours later, there was still no sign of him. I watched Aunt Minnie. She was pacing the room, trying rather desperately to keep up the conversation, but by this time, I was as worried as she.

"Would you like me to call the police?" I asked. "Do you think something's happened to him?"

"No, no, I'm sure he's just buried in some book somewhere. Only thing is, I'd like to know where, because the local library must've closed a long time ago."

The scraping noise of a key in the lock sent us rushing to the front door. Uncle Theo, his blue eyes

protruding more than ever, tried to slip past Minnie. She planted her entire bulk in the doorway, blocking his escape, and glared at him. “Would you mind telling us just where you’ve been all this time?”

“Now, don’t get mad, Min,” he begged. “Somebody told me they had great specimens of the Peripatus at the Museum of Natural History. But I never got there. I got lost in the subway and rode halfway around town before I could find the right train home.”

“That figures. Now, not that it matters, would you mind telling me, what’s a Peripatus?”

“It’s the link between the annelid worms and the arthropods.”

Minnie shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose I’d better get you something to eat. Peripatus!” she muttered, her head and entire frame shaking as she disappeared into the kitchen.

For some months after that, I did not see them. Then I met Aunt Minnie in the street.

“I say!” I exclaimed. “Have you been dieting? You’ve lost weight.”

“Yes,” she said, “there’s a new diet they’re advertising in the paper. I’ve tried it and look at the results. I can now wear clothes one whole size smaller than before.”

It seemed to me that she looked pale. “Don’t overdo it,” I warned, and promised to come see them the following weekend.

Aunt Minnie had made her best goulash with a delicious paprika sauce and tender, melt-in-the-mouth dumplings.

“You’re some cook,” I raved, wolfing down a huge portion. I looked at her plate. She had hardly touched the food. “Aunt Minnie, the idea of a diet is not to starve yourself. You’re not eating at all.”

“I don’t seem to have any appetite. I feel so queasy all the time now.”

I looked at her searchingly. She looked ill. “Have you seen the doctor?”

“Oh, what’s the use? He’ll only tell me the same as usual when I complain of this or that. It’s your nerves, he says.”

“Maybe it isn’t your nerves, this time. Go and see him.”

Minnie promised she would.

I had to go away on business for a few weeks, and when I came back, I saw Aunt Minnie. I tried not to show how shocked I was.

“I’m two sizes smaller now. I’ll soon be able to wear your discards,” she said. “The x-rays didn’t show anything. The doctor wants me to go into hospital for observation. I’m going in tomorrow.”

Next day, Uncle Theo called. “She’s got to have an operation.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Some female trouble.” He sounded distraught.

When I got to the hospital the following day, Uncle Theo looked flushed. His eyes were unnaturally bright.

“Is the operation over?” I asked. He nodded.

“Did they remove anything?” He shook his head.

“They opened her and closed her up again. She’s riddled with it, inoperable.”

“Did they say how long?” I asked.

“Impossible to say. They’re sending her home as soon as she’s strong enough. She has no idea. She thinks they removed a cyst from her ovary, and that she’s going to be all right.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” said Aunt Minnie, sitting up in her hospital bed. “I can tell you now, I was really convinced I had cancer. Of course, Theo kept saying I was silly, but I didn’t trust him to tell me the truth. And all the time it was just some stupid little cyst! They’ve taken it out and now I’ll be able to go to Switzerland.”

“When were you thinking of going?”

“As soon as they let me out of here. Switzerland holds many memories for me. We spent our honeymoon there. I love mountains and snow. I know I’ll have the time of my life!”

Sitting quietly in the corner, Uncle Theo coughed nervously.

“Come on, Uncle,” I said, “tell us, how high is the highest peak in Switzerland?”

“Not now, not now,” he said, getting up and holding the door open. “I think you’d best go. Minnie needs her rest.”

A week later, Minnie was home. The hospital’s social service had arranged for a nurse to come in for a couple of hours each day. I decided to call Sue.

“Sue, something will have to be done,” I said. “We can’t let Uncle Theo handle this all by himself. I offered to come in and help in the evenings after work, but that’s usually when the nurse is there. Can you spare a minute during the day?”

“Save it,” said Sue. “Don’t you think it’s occurred to me already? Theo absolutely refuses to have anyone else touch her. He insists that he and the nurse can manage, and to come and see Aunt Minnie as little as possible.”

“But, why?”

“I think he’s afraid that one or the other of us will give it away. It’s true in a way; it’s going to get more and more difficult to keep up the playacting.”

“But, does he strike you as the one who won’t? I’d have thought he’d be the first one to break.”

“I don’t know, Annie. I thought so, too. But who knows what a person can or cannot do? We’ll see. Anyway, he won’t have anyone help him, so that’s that.”

Shortly after, I thought of an excuse to visit Minnie. I bought her a cardigan, cranberry red, her favorite color. Uncle Theodore answered the door.

“I’ve brought Auntie a present,” I said. “May I come in?”

“What is it?” he asked, suspiciously.

“It’s a red cardigan, for her trip to Switzerland.”

He flushed. His eyes bulged. “Get out!” he shrieked hoarsely. “Get out of here and don’t ever come back!”

“But Uncle,” I whispered, helplessly, “don’t you see? It’s to...”

“Get out! Get out! Get...”

I didn’t hear the rest. I raced down the stairs from the sixth-floor apartment so quickly that it only occurred to me when I was already in the street that I could have used the elevator.

A few days later, Sue called me.

“Uncle Theo says, will you please come and see Aunt Minnie? And bring the cardigan.”

When I arrived, he opened the door and gave me one of his best smiles. “I told her about your gift,” he said. “She can’t wait to see it. She talks of nothing else.”

Minnie was overjoyed. She spent the afternoon talking about her trip, and how much she would enjoy wearing the cardigan, and how grateful she was to me. Uncle Theo went into the kitchen to make coffee.

“Tell you what,” she said suddenly, “that yellow and orange vase that you love so much, you shall have it when I’m gone.”

“Okay”, I said as brightly as I could, “but for the next thirty years, may I come and look at it in your apartment?” She patted my hand, without comment.

“I’m worried about Theo,” she said, after awhile. “Who’ll look after him when,” she hesitated, “when I’m in Switzerland? He’s so helpless.”

“Can he manage around the house now?” I asked.

“I can’t figure it out. I don’t know how he does it. You don’t know him as well as I do; maybe for you it’s natural that he should go into the kitchen and make coffee when I’m sick. But for me, I simply can’t believe it. I don’t know what I’d do without him. I’m so weak....” Her voice trailed off.

“Yes, and here I am sitting and chatting, when you should be having a rest,” I said. “I’d better go.”

“No, don’t, please don’t go yet,” Aunt Minnie pleaded. “It’s so seldom I talk to you nowadays. I can’t tell Theo what bothers me. I have to tell somebody. Perhaps I’m losing my mind, but I still think I have cancer. I am in so much pain, and I feel so tired, and I think I’m getting thinner all the time. I ought to be getting better by now, if it was the cyst that was causing all the trouble, don’t you think?”

“Auntie,” I said, “it’s only the period of convalescence, you’ll see. As soon as you get to Switzerland, you’ll be as right as ever. Change of air does wonders. It’s quite normal for people to imagine all sorts of things when they’ve just been through an illness. You’ll be so much better, soon. You’ll see.”



At that moment, I would have liked to vanish from the apartment, or at least hide my miserable face somewhere. Aunt Minnie, however, gave me a grateful smile. Uncle Theo came in with the coffee, and soon afterwards, I made my getaway.

Aunt Minnie now started to deteriorate rapidly. Whenever I came to see them, I found her moaning with pain. The shots the nurse gave her only lasted half the time. The other half she was in agony.

“I don’t know which is worse,” I said to Sue one day, “to hear Minnie, or to see Uncle’s ashen face. Are Frank and Lou coming?”

They’ve offered, but he doesn’t want them to. He feels that if they come, that’ll be the end of her hopes. She’ll know then.”

“What’s to become of Uncle Theo afterwards?” I asked. “Which one of the boys will have him?”

“Apparently, both have suggested that he join them,” said Sue. “Frank wants him, and Lou, too. But Uncle Theo says he knows he’d only be a burden to them. He says he’s got his future all worked out and he’s not going to leave here.”

“I’ll manage all right,” he said a few days later, when I brought up the subject.

“Why won’t you consider joining Lou?”

“I’m of no use to anyone. What use would I be to him?”

“Never mind that. Think about yourself. There are lots of libraries in Melbourne. You’ll be able to find out all about the duckbilled platypuses.”

“I know all about duckbilled platypuses,” he said flatly.

“Then how about London? Wouldn’t you like to live in London?”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’m best off here. I’ll manage. Don’t you think I can?”

I felt sorry for him. “Aunt Minnie says she doesn’t know what she’d have done without you.”

His face was radiant. “Did she really say that?”

“She really did.”

He straightened up and lifted his head. His eyes looked tender and far away. “Then, all’s well,” he said, “and there’s no reason for any of you to worry. When Minnie dies, I’m not going to join Frank. I’m not going to join Lou. I’ll do all right, you’ll see.”

One night, two weeks later, Minnie died in her sleep. Sue and I went to see Uncle Theo. He did not let us in. He left us for a moment, then came back with the yellow and orange vase. He pressed it into my hands.

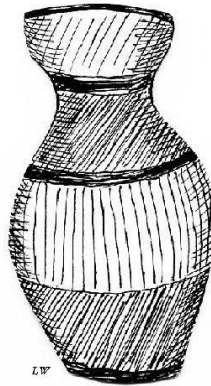
“There, she wanted you to have it,” he said. “Now if you don’t mind, please leave me. I’ve things to do.”

“You look exhausted, Uncle,” I said. “Try and get some sleep.”

“Thanks, Annie. I’ll do that. A good long sleep will do me good. Good-bye.”

He closed the door and we heard him walk into the apartment. We did not know, as we took the elevator down, that he was at the same time opening the living room window. Shortly after we left by the front entrance, people were gathering around Uncle Theo's body in the back yard. He had managed to hurl himself from the sixth-floor window to instant death.

*Hana Stranska*



## CATALOGS

I have a slot in my coat closet  
Through which the mailman doth deposit  
Letters and pamphlets and magazines,  
And lots and lots of catalogs, it seems  
If it wasn't for my little dry sink,  
The mail would scatter all over, I think.

Now up on the dry sink my kitty leaps.  
A vigil for Mailman Bob she keeps!  
Will our mailman soon be delivering?  
What anticipation! Her whiskers quivering!  
Ah! Hearing Bob's tread upon the court,  
Pumpkin is ready for her latest sport.

A black furry arm goes through the slot,  
Battling and fencing the tumbling lot  
Of letters and pamphlets and magazines,  
And more than our share of catalogs, it seems.  
There's not a dog-gone thing for a cat to read,  
Not even in the catalogs, indeed!

*Sarah Klos*



## C.O.D.

**M**illicent Dupres sighed deeply as she entered the dark, musty confines of the library. At thirty-four years, she remained unmarried, a small-town spinster librarian. She didn't suspect, she knew, her life was boring and dull as dishwater. Switching on the lights, she gathered up a pile of books from the after-hours deposit bin. Her eyes lit up as she retrieved a letter that had been dropped there. Shoving the letter into the pocket of her trim-fitting wool jacket, she dumped the books on the circulation desk, booted up her computer and then went into her office to start a pot of coffee. Russell would probably stop by for his caffeine fix later on and pick up the new Robert Parker mystery she had set aside on reserve. He was passionate about fictional whodunits, which probably provided for him an escape into a world of intrigue and skillful deduction. Unimaginative and down to earth, Russ was chief of police in this small mid-western town in Iowa. Dressed in his policeman blues, handcuffs dangling from his belt, his quiet and unassuming nature belied the professional way he pursued his job. Millicent was fond of Russell but, like herself, he was boring.

Sure enough, at 10:30 Russell appeared. She was busy phoning various patrons informing them that the books they had reserved were ready to be picked up. Then Mrs. Johnson needed help locating *Light from Heaven*, the latest book in the bestselling *Mitford* series by Jan Karon; and Doctor Adams, doing research on his genealogy, wanted the McCullough biography of John

Quincy Adams. Finally, she snatched the glasses from her nose and ran her fingers through her easy blow-dry hair. Slipping into her office, she found Russell waiting for her, coffee poured with a dash of Sweet’N Low just the way she liked it.

“Good morning, Russell. What’s new this week with the ongoing war against crime and terrorism?” She busied herself with a bag of fresh doughnuts she had picked up at the bakery on her way to work, placing them in a basket on her desk.

“Well, had to ticket Winston Palmer for double parking in front of the pharmacy on Main Street. Claims it was an emergency; and Louise Bailey is all in a snit because some kids toilet-papered her yard after the football game last night. Talk about a temper! Then Mildred Wilson called at midnight claiming someone was breaking into her house. Third time this week. I checked it out. Just a loose shutter banging around. She’s mighty lonely since Wilfred passed on.” He paused, cradling the mug of hot coffee in his hands, savoring the taste and the aroma.

“Had a nasty case of road rage to deal with yesterday. Stanley Peterson and Melvin Jacobson had a fender bender in the parking lot of the hardware store. Seems Stanley left the parking lot in his red Ford Mustang, and Melvin, driving his powerful SUV, slammed into him. They really mixed it up! Stanley was talking on his cell phone as usual, and Melvin was going over the speed limit and chewing on a Big Mac and eating French fries at the same time. Man, you should have seen the interior of that vehicle, French fries and

catsup all over the place! Never heard such cussing and hollering at each other. Drew quite a crowd. Hauled them both into the police station to cool off.”

Russell took another sip of coffee and he and Millicent sat in companionable silence.

“Here’s the new Parker book, Russell, *School Days*. It’s a page turner. You’re going to love it!”

“Thanks heaps.” He riffled through the pages of the hardcover book and smiled at the garish book jacket. It was befitting of the web of treachery and violence it enfolded. Then he stood up. “Well, gotta go.” Helping himself to a sugary jelly doughnut from the basket on her desk, he saluted her and left.

Millicent warmed up her coffee, then pulled the letter from her pocket. A smile flickered across her face as she read, “Miss Millie, you light up my life. Let me brighten up yours.” It was signed C.O.D. She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a bunch of other letters. They were all typed on the same nondescript paper and signed C.O.D. At random, she pulled one from the pile and read, “Up, up and away in my magic hot-air balloon. Does the rain in Spain fall mainly on the plain? Let’s find out!” Another read, “I’d like to get you on a slow boat to China. I’ll learn to use chopsticks if you will.” Yet another read, “It’s a foggy night in London town. Let’s feed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, visit the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, then find a pub and enjoy fish and chips.” Finally, “I love Paris in the springtime. I love Paris in the fall. Let’s view the City of Lights from the top of the Eiffel Tower and stroll down the Champs-Élysées together.” All were signed C.O.D. What’s that

supposed to mean? pondered Millicent. Who the heck is this person?

The letters had started to arrive in September, and it was now a week before Christmas. At first she was annoyed and slightly apprehensive, but by now she found herself intrigued and looked forward to them. They were always dropped anonymously in the return book slot. Cramming them back in the drawer, she returned to the circulation desk and filled out a reserve slip for Mrs. Bennett, who was craving the Nora Roberts romance *Three Fates*. She was in and out of the stacks throughout the afternoon, helping various town folk find what they wanted. As a child, she had spent hours in this very same library, dreaming and reading. The library was a peaceful spot, yet it offered a window on the world. She dreamed of faraway places and these letters had piqued her curiosity. Would she ever be able to stand in Westminster Abbey and shed a tear for the Brontë sisters or Charles Dickens? Pushing thoughts of hot-air balloons, trips to China, England or Paris from her mind, her day passed in pleasant but unexciting busyness.

That night a soft snow fell, covering the ground with crunchy crystals. Christmas was fast approaching. Unexpectedly another letter appeared in the drop box the next morning. “Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the land, snow’s a-glistening. We’ll rendezvous in front of the library at closing time. Don’t disappoint me. C.O.D.”

Millicent’s face turned rosy pink. “I’m too old for this nonsense.” She tucked the letter in her pocket and



went about the business of helping Jennifer Stevens find the research material she needed for her thesis on “Developmental Psychology, The Early Years.” Then eight-year old Michael Muldoon raced in for J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

At 5:00, she quickly closed down, adjusted the thermostat and dimmed the lights. She then went to the ladies’ room to freshen up. She powdered her nose and added a touch of lip-gloss. Throwing a soft blue scarf about her neck, she picked up a bunch of travel books for weekend reading and went out into the crisp, cold air. Christmas lights and street lights reflected off the snow and a sliver of a moon appeared in the sky. Panic overtook her as she stood indecisively at the top of the library steps. A tinkling, jingling sound caught her attention. Down the street came a sleigh drawn by a snorting, stomping horse. The sleigh glided over the packed snow and stopped at the base of the steps. Transfixed by the sight of Russell holding the reins, she gingerly picked her way down the slippery steps. “Russell, is that you?”

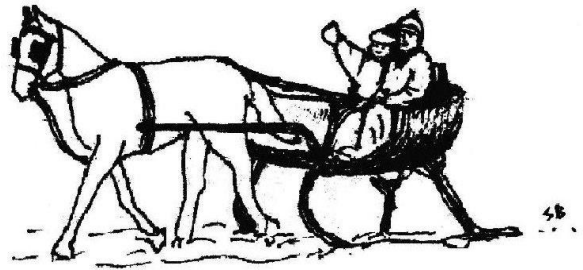
“Good evening, Miss Millie,” and he doffed his red knitted stocking hat. “May I offer you a ride home?”

“Russell, oh Russell.” Tears came to her eyes, which she hastily wiped away. Dear, sweet, familiar, unimaginative Russell. “Yes Russell, you may offer me a ride home, or take me on a slow boat to China, or whisk me away in a hot-air balloon,” and she reached for his strong hand and climbed into the sleigh. She didn’t release it even after a warm, furry rug was tucked about

her. “But Russell, C.O.D. What does that stand for, Russ?”

Eyes twinkling, Russell responded, “Cop on duty, of course. About time this cop took charge of your life!”

*Edith R. Pray*



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## **BREAKING FREE**

Walking along on the sidewalk,  
I see much litter around the trash container at the bus  
stop.

I glance at the trash.

I marvel at people's messiness, the lack of beauty and  
order.

I am filled with criticism and judgment.

I walk on. Clearly this is not my responsibility.

I didn't create this mess. I don't clean it up.

People will have to put up with this trash.

I feel proud I have not gotten caught up in my  
compulsive taking-care-of habit.

I am clear about my boundaries.

I know that you and I are separate.

Walking along on the sidewalk,

I see much litter around the trash container at the bus  
stop.

I look hard at the trash. I wonder about it.

What made this mess? People pressed for time?

Windy weather, lack of caring?

I am aware of the pull of my compulsive taking-care-of  
habit. But I do want to be a part of a cooperative  
effort to keep the environment clean and orderly.

Conflicted, I pick up the trash grumbling and fussing.

I do act in spite of my feelings and according to a larger  
reality.

I jam the trash into the trash container.

I have chosen to step over my boundaries even while  
protesting.

Walking along on the sidewalk  
I see much litter around the trash container at the bus  
stop.  
As I stare at the trash, the spirit stirs in my heart and I  
am startled to see myself in this mess.  
A still small voice whispers:  
It is your trash, too.  
I feel an upsurge of love and compassion for my brother  
and sisters. I am mindful of the painful patterns we  
all get caught in.  
I want to be part of realizing God's beauty and order in  
this world.  
I shift from chronos time to kairos time. \*  
I am aware of the old compulsive taking-care-of habit.  
But it no longer has the power to drive me. Now, I  
freely decide to act out of love.  
Gleefully, I gather the trash and stash the trash in the  
trash container.  
My clear, firm but flexible boundaries yield to a  
redemptive oneness with others.  
I bless this place and go on my way smiling and silently  
greeting that of God in whomever I meet.

*Margery Larabee*

\* Clock time to God's unlimited time

## SEQUESTERED

**J**ury duty is a responsibility of citizenship in the United States. It is an essential part of the judicial system where a person accused of a crime is judged before a jury of his peers. Many prospective jurors find a reason to be excused from jury duty, but it is an experience that provides an inside look at the system of laws governing our society.

When I moved to Philadelphia and registered to vote, I became part of a pool from which prospective jurors are selected. I received a summons to report to City Hall, where I sat in a large room with about 100 other people and waited. We watched television, read newspapers, chatted and otherwise passed the time. We tried to work up a bridge game. We found three players but never were able to make up a foursome.

Soon my name was called, and I lined up with about 40 other people and was led to a courtroom. Present were the two defendants, a man and a woman; the judge; the prosecuting attorney, Arlen Specter; and the two defense attorneys. We filled out a preliminary questionnaire. Automatically dismissed were people who knew any of the participants, or who were related to an attorney, judge or policeman. A neighbor of mine had never served on a jury because her husband had been a lawyer. We were questioned individually, based on the answers on our questionnaires. Questions included whether we had ever been the victim of a crime, or whether we would be inclined to believe the testimony of a police officer over that of another person. One

man was asked about his job: was he a fireman? The man responded, “No, I am a firefighter. A fireman shovels coal into the engine of a locomotive.” That brought a laugh from those in the courtroom. The prosecuting attorney and defense attorneys each had a certain number of peremptory challenges they could make to eliminate a prospective juror without giving a reason. In this manner twelve jurors and two alternates were chosen.

The trial was about two Philadelphia magistrates, minor public officials, who were accused of illegally taking money from people in exchange for doing favors for them. The case was politically sensitive and made local headlines, so the jury was sequestered – i.e., the jurors were isolated and cut off from all contact with family and friends until the trial was over. I was told to pack for a week’s stay at a hotel and taken to my home by police car, then to the old Essex Hotel, which was across the street from City Hall where the courtroom was located. One floor in the hotel was cleared of all guests except for the jurors. No telephone calls were allowed; only emergency calls were accepted, and those were relayed by a court officer. The court officer was a civilian employed by the court system to guard and monitor the jurors – a jury-sitter. Breakfast and lunch were delivered to the jurors. We went to dinner as a group, always escorted by the court officer, who paid for the dinners.

When we went from the hotel to the courtroom, the court officer accompanied us as we crossed the street together, and kept away anyone who attempted to talk to

us. We filed into the courtroom and took our seats in the jury box.

Arlen Specter, looking very self-assured and in command, sat alone at a table facing the jury. The two defense attorneys sat at a table on the other side of the courtroom. The trial began. The two defendants were accused of taking bribes for favors; in other words, abusing their positions as officers of the law.

The judge admonished the jurors not to talk about the case among ourselves until the trial ended and we retired to the jury room to deliberate. At bathroom breaks the bathroom was cleared of everyone else before the jurors were allowed in, and a court officer kept guard until all the jurors were finished; then we were escorted back to the jury box in the courtroom.

Back at the hotel, jurors were not allowed to read newspapers, listen to the radio or watch television news. No TV program that involved trials and courtroom scenes could be watched. That ruled out the Perry Mason series. There was a popular soap opera airing on television at the time, "Peyton Place," in which one of the main characters was on trial for murder. Jurors who had been avidly following the story were given a synopsis of the episode by a court officer.

In the courtroom the jurors listened carefully as witnesses took the stand but did not take notes. The prosecutor accused the defendants of illegally soliciting money from people who appealed to them for assistance. The defendants said they helped people in their dealings with the city, but not in exchange for money. At the end of four days of testimony and final

summations by the prosecution and defense, the judge gave his instructions to the jury, and the jurors retired to deliberate. Two alternate jurors had sat through the trial; now they were dismissed.

In the jury room Juror No. 1 was chosen as foreman. A preliminary vote was taken. The vote was not unanimous. As jurors discussed the case, the vote went back and forth: guilty or not guilty for each defendant. Many jurors did not find it believable that the defendants did favors for people merely out of the goodness of their hearts. Finally, after several hours, 11 jurors were in favor of guilty for both defendants. There was one holdout against the guilty verdict. He was eventually persuaded to find both defendants guilty of bribery. The jury returned to the courtroom and delivered the verdict. We were polled individually as to our verdict, and the judge thanked and dismissed us.

I had asked my sister to keep newspaper clippings of the trial so I could read them after the trial was over. Reading the news accounts, I was surprised that I received a different impression of the trial from that received in the courtroom. Sitting in the courtroom, there were nuances and observations of body language that made the defendants appear more guilty than they seemed from reading about the trial on the printed page. It was an interesting experience. It made me appreciate the wisdom of the founding fathers in including the right of a jury trial in the Constitution of the United States.

Today juries are very seldom sequestered, even in first-degree murder cases, unless it is a very high profile trial. Jurors are allowed to go home in the evening,



warned by the judge not to discuss the case with anyone – neither family nor friends. A sequestered jury is much too expensive.

Arlen Specter was at the beginning of his political career. He was elected District Attorney for Philadelphia and served two terms from 1966 to 1974. After serving as District Attorney, Specter was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1980 and has been reelected since then to become the senior senator from Pennsylvania, and rose to the position of chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

*Sumiko Kobayashi*

## **FUNERAL PYRE**

Friendly fire  
Enemy fire  
It's all insane  
Just the same.

*Lori Berliner*

## PETALS AND THORNS

*I*

What's a smart bomb?  
Asked the child  
With a look in his eye  
With fear quite wild.  
    That,  
My child, depends  
On whom it defends.

*II*

A smart bomb  
It is justice apparent.  
    Is one  
That blossoms  
When it comes home  
To its parent.

*III*

A smart bomb  
Is one  
That smarts  
No one.  
    And  
It's one  
That will be built  
Never.  
Then it would  
Really be  
Clever.

*Lori Berliner*

## SCULPTURES OF THE DESERT

Ballet poses, angular, humorous, sometimes lumpy,  
gangly and grotesque.

One is graceful, lovely with pointed toe.

Another, a double-jointed acrobat doing antics.

Some seem skilled gymnasts, muscular and tall,

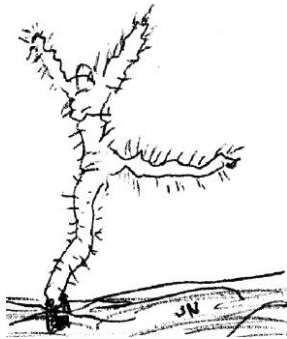
Assuming impressive stances, strange and silent.

The pink hue of sunset behind each figure blends in with  
the darker lavenders

and pinks of the Mojave Desert.

You have been there for centuries and you will be there  
for centuries to come.

Strange Joshua trees. \*



*\*Joshua trees are small tree-shaped Yuccas with sword-shaped leaves and clusters of white flowers. They are native to deserts in the southwestern United States. If it survives the rigors of the desert, the tree can live a couple of hundred years. Early Mormon pioneers, who crossed the Mojave Desert in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, named them after the biblical character, Joshua. The trees' unique shapes reminded them of a biblical story in which Joshua reaches his hands up to the heavens.*

*Jean Nicholson*

## TRASH OR TREASURE?

**O**n a very hot and humid day, I received a call to look at the contents of an apartment for a possible estate sale. I don't like apartment sales that are open to the public because of the limited space, so I was feeling rather negative as I climbed the one flight of garden apartment stairs and rang the bell.

A perfectly made-up woman in shorts greeted me. "You've GOT to help me. I'm moving to California to live near my daughter and I have to get rid of everything by the end of the month – or almost everything!"

One look around and my only thought was, "How can I get out of this?" We walked through two bedrooms, one filled with very worn antique-shop French Provincial twin bedroom sets with much of the gold missing and the other done up in waterfall walnut with Hepplewhite style brasses. I noticed a pair of men's bedroom slippers tucked under the bed.

We sat down and I saw a silver chest on the glass coffee table. "Oh, is the silver for sale?" I asked. "No, I'm keeping that."

There were a few Hummels on top of a bookcase. "No, they're for my daughter."

And it went on like that.

Finally I said, "There really isn't anything here to attract people to come. I'm so sorry. It's just that it's mostly worn second-hand furniture."

“Oh,” she said. “I do have a really ugly Oriental lamp thing. Would you like to see it? When I got my divorce, I took it to spite my husband because it was the only thing he wanted.”

She went to the coat closet and I followed. After pulling coat hangers sagging with winter clothes, she handed me a carton of galoshes and overshoes and said, “Hold these, please,” while she reached down for a lumpy brown shopping bag stuffed with an object that was wrapped in bath towels. As I lifted it out of the bag, the base rattled off and rolled across the floor.

I started unwrapping what felt like a large doll. She said, “My husband was a naval patrol officer in China.” The minute she said “China” my heart jumped because I knew it had to be from the time before restrictions were imposed on exporting antiquities.

I was holding a heavy clay figurine. At first look, I thought it was quite ugly and I didn’t know what to say to her. It had an unglazed head, a worn glazed painted body, and big clumsy shaped feet.

Then a bell rang in my head. I remembered from some reference book that the Chinese memorialized the dead with unglazed heads, and then my heart really did pump. Better check for glazed faded green areas of paint. The body had butterscotch glaze dripping down. Suddenly an image of Tang horses came to mind. Could it be? Could I be holding a Tang dynasty piece? That came from a coat closet? I asked if I could take it with me and do a little research.

“Sure,” she said, “but don’t sell it for less than \$50.00. A dealer at the flea market offered my boyfriend that much for it. We thought a little Tide would clean up the face but we never got around to it. I never could stand the looks of it.”

The sale was to be three weeks later. I agreed.

As soon as I got home, I checked my Chinese reference books. The color was right. Then I saw a picture of a Tang warrior. Could it be? The heavy old figurine looked just like the picture.

I have to admit my confidence was truly shaken when I showed it to a few close friends, but I had to find out if this was the real thing. So off I went to Sotheby’s by bus and train, with Turkish towels around my warrior, worried every moment that I might take a wrong step and drop my unidentified treasure. Finally, I arrived at Sotheby’s.

“What do you have there?” the very superior person at the front desk asked me.

“A Chinese figure,” I said.

“Brass?”

“No, ceramic,” I replied.

“Let me see.”

Suddenly, I was a V.I.P. “Go to the fourth floor and ask for Mr. Thieu.”

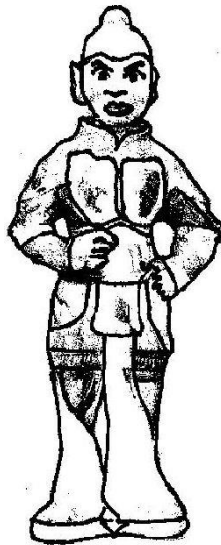
Upstairs, they took my warrior behind doors and were gone for a long time. Then a most distinguished gentleman came out. He bowed as we met, then

introduced himself. "I am Mr. Thieu." He invited me into an enclosed glass booth. We sat down.

He said, "This is a fine Tang Dynasty Guardian and I would very much like to include it in my sale in December. It should bring six to eight thousand dollars."

It sold on December 4, 1985, for \$6,400 at Sotheby's in New York.

*Rose Cruikshank*





## HIGHLIGHT

**W**hat did you have for dinner today? Just an ordinary everyday question. If I say, “Oh, we had roast chicken – it was really good,” that is not the story at all.

How to tell you of the other things – the crisp celery, the wedge of bitter-sweet cranberry salad, the one piece of sweet potato I took regardless of diet, a bit of stuffing and plenty of gravy. (Did I say something about weight?) Oh, yes, a slice of beet and I don’t like them at all. Still, one must make one’s plate look complete.

Shall I tell you about the subdued highlight on our two pieces of real silver? It is only silver that holds this special glow – a light that the eye can dwell on and stand its beauty.

There is the old stumpy candle in its brass holder, a bargain bought once at a flea market.

Our candle is for “company.” It is a little light for rejoicing over a special, unexpected pleasure, and poor little candle, it has the ponderous duty of cheering us when things go wrong. Well, today as we shared our meal, our little flame burned brightly on, with hardly a sputter.

I’m going to have one piece of bread with my meal today, I say, flinging the scare of preservatives, too many calories or starches to the winds – I just love bread and butter and it’s so homey and usual.

Don't let me forget to mention the little bowl of petunias as centerpiece. They catch every bit of flickering light and do their share in satisfying our souls. Conversation? Oh, we don't mind talking of this or that – there is no profound statement made. And yet, these moments of togetherness – oh, what precious gems to store away in the heart.

Our simple meal, our pretense of celebration the while loving our everyday feeling of familiar things – all this is difficult to picture for you when you ask: “What did you have for dinner today?”

*Edith Y. Ellis*



## A SAILING MISADVENTURE

I was born in my great-grandfather's house in Lindenhurst, Suffolk County, just a mile or so from Great South Bay on Long Island. Understandably, I became passionate about sailing. At 17 in 1943, with my mother's consent, I enlisted in the U. S. Naval Air Pilots' Program and was sent to Middlebury College. As the war progressed, the need for naval pilots diminished, so I completed my studies as a naval engineer graduating from Tufts College, and served on the U. S. Destroyer Massey DD778 until the end of the war.

In 1974 an acquaintance, Will Smith, enlisted me and another friend, Hank Schnepf, to help him sail his 31-foot one-masted, Maine pinky sloop from a port in Massachusetts to Atlantic City. Will was courageous, as you will see later on in my tale, but he was no sailor; and Hank was willing and strong but a novice with little sailing experience.

Before we were to set sail from Fair Haven, MA, we had a night of revelry to celebrate our coming adventure. At 5 a.m. the next morning, we boarded the boat at the Fair Haven inlet and, with lowered sails, motored through the hurricane gates out to sea. It was mid-March and cold but the sea was fairly calm, so, a few miles out, we cut the engine and hoisted the mainsail and the jib.

All three of us were on deck with Will at the tiller, and I, as the first mate, was next to him and Hank was standing by. Suddenly, Will handed me the tiller and said that he felt seasick and had to go below. I thought his

feeling was due to our revelry the night before, but it turned out that he had a recurring seasick problem. This put me in the role of captain by default with inexperienced Hank as my first mate. As it turned out, I would hold on to that tiller for almost 36 hours with no relief.

About 5 p.m., twelve hours after starting out and twilight coming on, the weather turned increasingly foul. The temperature dropped down to freezing. The wind was blowing gusts up to 50 miles an hour, and there were ten-foot-high waves battering the boat. With very little free board, we were deep into the water and the waves started to come into the cockpit.

Hank wanted to be of help so I suggested that he go below to get the wool sox I had brought along; we used them as gloves and I needed them to hold on to the wet tiller in the stormy sea. There was no radio on board and, with much difficulty, I wanted to keep the shoreline in view in case we had to abandon the boat. Hank asked if there was anything he could do. I said, "Maybe you could pray."

With the wind gusting, the shrouds made of nylon were starting to stretch, and the mast started to sway. I was afraid that we would be demasted while the sails were still up. I got the engine started, while Hank got the mainsail down, but the jib got stuck. I suggested he go below to find an axe to chop the jib away. When Will heard that was my plan, his courage mounted and took away his seasickness, and he came up from below, hysterically, climbed on the bow sprit and disentangled the jib while three waves came over the boat and

engulfed him. He was determined to save his boat, at all cost.

My aim was to use the engine to run the boat aground on the beach if the boat started to founder. I asked Will to take the tiller, since up to that time I had held on to it for almost 24 hours without letup, but he said he had to go down below because he was seasick. What the hell was I to do but stay the course.

When daylight came, Will thought we had reached Atlantic City due to the time lapse. However, I noted a buoy that said JB. Having grown up near Great South Bay area, I knew that stood for Jones Beach. Without much further incident, we reached Manasquan Inlet, about 80 miles from Atlantic City.

We sailed in at 1 p.m. to replace the diesel fuel and pick up some food. Will insisted that we start out again so that he could get to Atlantic City. As we sailed out of the inlet, the seas began to pick up, and I noticed that the Coast Guard was shepherding the trawlers in to port. Will was standing at the hatch preparing to go below, and I was at the tiller with Hank sitting on the first mate spot comforting me. It was difficult to hold the tiller and eat, so I threw the sandwich over the side, and then threw the beer over, too. I said, "I'm done. We are going back in," and Hank said "Amen." From the safety of down below, Will said: "You're a couple of sissies."

On shore, I called my wife, who was good enough to come and pick us up. I curled up in the back of the car after 36 hours of no sleep and my hand tied to the tiller. At home, due to lack of sleep and the dizziness from the ordeal, I fell out of bed twice.

Even though he had called me a sissy, a month or so later I recruited my daughter, Carole, a skillful navigator, and we sailed the boat to Atlantic City, with Will about as much help as before.

*Al Pfeiffer as told to Anita W. Goldworth*

## SAURIAN SONGS

Could dinosaurs sing? Of course;  
Don't their offspring, the birds, sing?  
Indeed the saurs sang and trilled and warbled.  
And so their booming voices  
split the rocks and parted the earth!  
Do not the canyons bear witness  
to the bass bellowing of happy mega-lizards?  
And the Andes, they say, were erected  
by the effects of four-part saurian harmony  
(and two nascent South American civilizations  
were destroyed in the process).  
Could dinosaurs sing? Can birds lay eggs and walk?

*William Pickering*



## REQUIEM

(They say that, in prehistory, Homo sapiens and a similar man, called Neanderthal, coexisted.)

Neanderthal, Neanderthal!

Were you favored or despised by the gods?

Were you the pre-human vagabonds of history  
or proto-men displaced by final men?

Why would the gods endow you with qualities  
that were genetic cul-de-sacs?

We mourn you, Neanderthal!

We have only seen your bones in your valley:

Did you weave, love pets, play games?

Did you sing to your children?

Did you watch the setting sun?

We hear that, in the Neander Valley, there is

A constant echo of strange noises.

*William Pickering*



## A PET THOUGHT

With our kids we'd like to share their joys,  
we take an interest in Christmas toys,  
but, oh, I'd gladly give it up,  
if Santa would take this awful pup!

There was left a note inside the collar,  
nothing was said of how much it would holler.

Johnnie was to bathe it, walk it, feed it,  
but I, his mother, say we really don't need it!

Our shoes are torn up, the carpet's "a-sog,"  
honestly, Santa, why leave a dog?

I tell you the house is a terrible sight,  
but "Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!"

*Edith Y. Ellis*

## CHRISTMASES PAST

While once again rummaging through our dwindling collection of lights, ornaments and other seasonal décor in anticipation of the coming holiday season, I had occasion to remember back to my first Christmases while growing up in Baltimore in the early '30s. The first floor of our row house had simply a living room, dining room and kitchen, together with a small entrance hall. Early in December, my parents sealed off the dining room with bed sheets hung over its two entrances in order to keep me out and prevent my seeing, much less participating in, all of the exciting and mysterious activities going on within. I could hear the banging, shuffling and other sounds coming from the room, but my curiosity was always redirected elsewhere by my parents. All of this because they were busy assembling our extraordinary Christmas “garden” in the dining room, and I wouldn't be allowed to see the results till Christmas morning. My excitement grew daily!

In Baltimore at that time, the seasonal train platform with lighted houses was called a Christmas garden. As I grew older, I was eventually allowed to help with some of the arrangements and thereby came to realize how much preparation and effort my folks spent each Christmas to make the holiday so special for me and my younger brothers. The tree, which of necessity was placed in the adjacent living room, was always so large that its top was bent from colliding with the ceiling. Our family had acquired a number of large Christmas balls from Germany, each a faded pastel seven or eight

inches in diameter and featherlight. These became a traditional mainstay of our tree each year. Needless to say, the strings of colored lights were the old variety, cone shaped and temperamental. If one went out, the rest followed! We attached reflective collars to some of the bulbs, adding brilliance to the display. Carefully placing the tinsel or icicles on every available branch and limb of the balsam was performed with sacramental precision. It took a long while before my father was finally satisfied.

However, my delight as a child was the Christmas garden. Two large platforms, approximately 8 x 10 feet, were bolted together, creating a long single structure running the length of the dining room. The dining room furniture had been removed to other parts of the house, thereby freeing the entire room for the display. A friend had constructed four groups of mountains from plaster of Paris, each embedded with tiny paper houses with colored windows, which were lit from behind by strings of lights. The mountains were placed at the rear of the platform. Sockets for additional lights were scattered throughout the forward area of the display, and larger houses were set over these. My mother set a mirror in the center, suggesting a frozen lake, and populated it with oversized skaters and sleds. A row of tall lampposts, gigantic beside the houses, guarded the front of the display. Each was fitted with a conical blue bulb, totally unrealistic but important in creating the effect of a cold, wintry night once the garden was illuminated. Surrounding the entire layout was a three-rail standard gauge Lionel track over which my beloved freight train roared, actually shaking the room.

Against my mother's better judgment, my father decided that white flour simulated snow better than other more practical suggestions. Bags of it were generously distributed over the platform, covering everything. We then set tiny stick people into the flour along with equally tiny wooden carts, trucks, cars and animals. The obviously divergent sizes of the little people, the houses, the giant lampposts and the enormous standard gauge train reminds us that realism and scale were yet to be factored into Christmas displays before the war. A Christmas garden was a magical land of make-believe. In a small concession to reality, I was allowed to scatter hominy kernels between the rails of track to simulate stones, after which we sprinkled flakes of mica over the flour, covering houses, lake and mountains in frosted beauty.

What can I say? It was all rather impractical and guaranteed to create a huge mess! It took weeks before my mother was able to completely vacuum the flour from the rugs on the first floor. I recall still finding traces of it between the floorboards in the summer. But if you could have lain with me on the small area of the dining room floor which could accommodate observers, with your head set at eye level to the platform as if you were one of the little people, a participant in the display, with all the house lights turned off and only the Christmas garden illuminated, you could perhaps experience some of the excitement and magic which I knew in Christmases past. There were switches on the platform from which I was able not only to run the train but also to control the lighting. Sometimes I would turn on only the houses in the foreground or just those houses nestled

in the mountains, or simply the cold, blue lights of the tall lampposts shining down on the glittering snow, as if protecting the slumbering village throughout the long wintry night. I so loved our Christmas garden that my parents would keep it up till my birthday in mid-January. In the midst of winter, as well as the Depression, it became a source of magic and delight...as its memory is for me today.

*Tom Lang*



## IN MY IMAGINARY GARDEN

In my imaginary garden,  
The flowers bloomed in such profusion.  
Nourished by spring showers,  
Strengthened by summer breezes  
(And because I named them all),  
They grew wild with joy.  
Golden buckspar and bright blue wispertips  
Were sentinel to the surrounding wood.  
My paths were fringed with  
Purple umbarillis and yellow Mandy's Love.  
Throughout the garden, scarlet Billy's Coat stood tall.  
There were delicate white opaerium  
And the pale peach sandilass growing in abundance.  
Having time and energy,  
I named at least a dozen more.

Now my mental axis is tilting north.  
My imaginary summer's passed,  
And the autumn colors have floated to the ground.  
Though a heavy winter's snow has fallen in my mind,  
I can clearly see one small opening.  
There, a single flower thrives, unnamed.

*Chris Darlington*

## THE SLIDING BOARD

At the top rung of the ladder,  
While the superlatives and  
Generalities of youth  
Cloud my view of middle age,  
I see the downward slide  
And I plunge.

Over and over, the headlong run  
Takes me from the end of stop  
To the lowest rung of the ladder,  
Yet a slow walk through  
The language of another childhood.

The Universe grows older with each  
Climb-the-ladder,  
Where the speed of light is too slow.

With the waning sun, the call comes,  
Time to leave the playground.  
We're going home.

*Chris Darlington*

## NIGHTTIME THOUGHTS

I'm lying here on my bed, thinking about what I'm trying to express. I wish I could converse with someone who could be a serious sharer of thoughts, who would not brush me off, saying don't be so serious. I'm in this period of waiting for death, wishing there was another willing to share these thoughts, not run away from them. It is serious thinking. Where does it lead? No one alive would wish to talk to me about this seriously, what I think, waiting for the most serious thinking process of my life. I don't really think there is an afterlife as much as I would like to, so what will happen? Probably I will have a sudden headache that will take me in some fashion to the end. If not then, there will be other nights, other moments like this one when I wake. I think of Leah, when she was living downstairs. Oh well, will I feel like this tomorrow or other nights of waiting, other nights of sharing, alas not with Leah, but with my notebook? How many people have spent nighttime hours waiting, wondering and questioning, looking out of the window asking, "Will I see the sun tomorrow?" Perhaps lightning will strike and the pen fall from my hand. What luck if it would, but no, on to other nights.

*Patricia Lowe*