

# LEAS LIT

*The Medford Leas Literary Journal*



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## **LEAS LIT STAFF**

Stanley Brush  
Sally Burrowes  
Ruth Gage  
Herb Heineman  
Maggie Heineman  
Sarah Klos  
Joan McKeon  
Edith R. Pray  
George Rubin  
Florence Sawyer  
Ellen Stimler  
Hana Stranska  
Della Williams\*  
Helen Vukasin

Original cover design by Harry Forrest

Illustrations by Stanley Brush, John Brzostoski, Todd  
Butler, John Sommi, Lili Wronker

\*deceased

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From the desk of

No. 132

10 November 1994



Dear Kitty:

Attached is the manuscript about which I talked to you last week.

It records what I saw, felt and heard in a critical period while in the hospital for two months with a near fatal illness in 1939.

I wrote this during a two-month convalescence, filed it away and forget all about it. Now 55 years after I wrote it I discovered it and pass it along to you for your interest and disposition.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Ed F.'.

Edward (Ping) Folwell, the author of Journey, passed away in May 2006 at the age of 105. In 1994 Kitty Katzell was the editor of Medford Leas Life.

## JOURNEY

Phillip Crane was lying in bed with his face toward the window. He was peering out with an interested and also very puzzled expression. In health, Phillip was a man of medium weight and height with light brown hair partially sprinkled with grey. His rimless glasses were so much a part of him that even his oldest friends could not imagine him without them.

There was a deep flush on his face, much deeper than that of a naturally ruddy complexion after exposure to cold weather, or that resulting from an overheated room or an excessive intake of alcohol. It was fever.

His curiosity and intent observation was due to the fact that there appeared to be a man outside. It was obvious that this figure had been very close to the window, but was now slowly walking away. The retreating form was that of a man of medium height with light brown hair. His head turned momentarily, just enough for Phillip to see that the glasses he wore were rimless and that there was a deep flush on his face. As Phillip, now on the borderline of lucidity and aberration, tried to collect his thoughts, the man outside continued to walk slowly away.

The world of Phillip Crane now appeared to be slightly dull and overcast, and a low thin mist was beginning to form. The human form was no longer sharply outlined and now appeared like a picture out of focus. Phillip had remained motionless until this time as his mind tried to rationalize what he was seeing.

Suddenly, all inertia vanished with a strange and compelling feeling that he must not lose sight of the rapidly disappearing figure whose dim outline was now barely distinguishable in the thickening mist. He must go after him or make him come back or at least stop retreating, but most importantly, he must never let him disappear entirely from his sight.

Phillip attempted to rise from his bed, and failing to do so, he tried desperately to project his thoughts by sheer concentration. As he lay back, breathing heavily from both physical and mental exertion, he slowly closed his eyes. He felt so tired, so very, very tired.

It is never really pitch dark when one closes one's eyes, even in the darkest night. Phillip had never ceased to marvel at and enjoy his discovery that to find light, of certain kinds at least, it was only necessary to shut out the dark. When he closed his eyes at night, there were always those changing patterns of color and design, "thought clouds" he sometimes liked to call them. It was so nice to go to sleep with the vision of a color symphony.

But when Phillip now closed his eyes, it was not to those familiar chromatic variegations. This time a dense black cloud seemed to drop before the misty, turbulent vision of his eyes. He opened them to dispel the descending murky curtain that he was sure portended some kind of finality. Every time Phillip closed his eyes there appeared that foreboding symbol of the umbra of oblivion. With great effort, he struggled to keep his eyes open, until finally he closed them – on a white mist.

Phillip slowly became aware that he was in motion. What a strange feeling it was to be raised up, to be moving without direction in translucent space without dimension. It was neither unpleasant nor exciting, but it did seem to be a little warm. That whiteness, that mist – it must be cool and would feel so good if it would flow over his face, which now seemed to be on fire; then it seemed to thicken and swirl and to envelop him completely. Phillip thought of soft cool water, of soft cool breezes, and soft cool mist. He had not realized before how much living there could be in just feeling such a small a part of the world for a moment.

Phillip went to many places, but there did not seem to be any time required to get from one place to another, nor did there seem to be any logical sequence in the things he saw. He kept going with effortless motion – in nothing to nowhere. But it must be somewhere. Now it looked like a garden where the flutter of a bird's wings was enough to disperse the gentle fragrance of flowers and where one could almost taste the ripened fruit by merely breathing their heavy essence. And that music, muted organ notes and bells, which seemed to be in no one place, but all around.

Time passed, time – the instant that seems to last forever, an endless duration – which seems but an instant; time to die and time to live, and the time it takes to measure time.

Phillip, whose eyes had been closed so long while he focused on those distant horizons, had been awake for several minutes without opening his eyes. He did not

want to open them until he had a chance to rationalize his thoughts. There were voices, familiar voices, speaking but little above a whisper. He opened his eyes just enough for a narrow slit of light to filter through his eyelashes. Yes, there were his wife, his doctor, a nurse and his sister. What was his sister doing here in the hospital? He now knew that indeed, he was in one, but his sister lived several states away and had visited his home only a short time before. He knew he had been sick, but perhaps it had been more serious than he realized if it had been necessary to call in his family from various parts of the country.

As Phillip lay there, he heard the doctor say to his wife and sister, "I am now confident that he is going to be all right. Better go home and get some rest and sleep." Phillip pondered this statement about himself, who had been away for a long time in distant places. He was weak, but he now experienced a new sense of power and exhilaration.

A faint trace of a smile appeared on his face, as he had known long before the doctor did that he was going to live. The last thing he remembered before he awoke to rationality was a quickly thinning mist. In the distance was the figure of a man whose features were rapidly becoming more discernible. As it approached closer and closer to literally merge with himself, Phillip saw that the man appeared to be of medium height and weight with light brown hair, and was wearing rimless glasses. There was but a slight flush on his face.

*Edward (Ping) Folwell*



## AFFIRMATION

One notices first the amazing sparkling eyes.  
Inner beauty transcends  
The gnarled hands and bent legs,  
Twisted and aged.  
A prisoner of her wheeled chariot,  
Yet courageous and independent as she spins along.  
Her heart is filled with music and love.  
She smiles this way and that,  
Sharing a bit of news, giving a word of encouragement,  
Offering a friendly greeting, or a word of praise.  
Carefully dressed,  
Determined,  
Fearless,  
Alive.  
Am I capable of such bravery?

*Edith R. Pray*

# TCHAIKOVSKY

## Concerto No. 1, B-flat minor, Op. 23

for Piano and Orchestra

*Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso*  
Str. *mf*

*mf*

*Allegro con spirito*  
Str. *p*  
Piano *p*

1

*W.W.*  
*p molto espress.*

2

3 *v.*  
*p*

## PIANO CONCERTO IN B FLAT MINOR

It had snowed lightly all morning. A pale sun tried, with little success, to shine through the fast-moving clouds. Steve sat in front of his apartment window and looked out at the snow-covered park. The trees and walks glistened in the cold half-light. On the table beside him was an email from his agent. He read it. “Steve, the *New Yorker* wants your latest story, but it needs considerable editing. Let me hear from you.” He put it down and picked up the letter that was next to it. He took off his glasses and wiped the lenses. He read it again. “My dear Steve – I know this is not the way to say goodbye, but after all our years together I don’t know any other way. I know it’s time for me to move on, but I will always love you – Andrew.”

Steve crushed the letter into a ball and raised his lanky frame from the chair. His shoulders drooped as he paced back and forth. It’s a lousy day in so many ways, he thought. He looked at his CD collection. His eyes moved over the titles. He stopped at the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto #1. He took the CD out of its jewel case and put it into his player. The deep vibrant chords of the piano announced the opening movement. Steve walked over to the window and looked at the blowing snow, the music playing behind him.

Just think, he reflected, we have the same birthday, Tchaikovsky and I. I wonder what kind of man he was. When I listen to his music, I wish I could have met him.

Same birthday, he repeated, I wonder how alike we would be?

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the front door, soft at first, then louder and stronger.

“OK, hold your horses! Who is it?” Steve asked through the closed door.

“It’s your friend Pyotr Ilyich.”

Steve stood in shocked amazement.

“Come open the door. It’s cold out here in the hallway.”

Steve opened the door. Before him stood a tall, good-looking man. His fur hat and fur-collared coat were snow-covered. His dark gray beard was covered with moisture. Steve Stoller, a picture of frozen amazement, was only able to mumble, “Peter. Please come in.”

Pyotr Ilyich shook the snow off his coat, then removed it together with his hat and gloves. He laid them over the nearest chair.

“Ah, listening to my music. What a beautiful rendition. You know, Anton Rubinstein hated it, but I refused to change a single note. At the first performance in Boston it received an enthusiastic reception.”

When Tchaikovsky had finished his little speech, Steve, who was still in shock, said, “But it can’t be you! How? Why?”

“My friend, *how* would take too long to explain, but *why* may be of some help to you. It’s quite simple: You asked for me, remember? The same birth date, your soul mate Pyotr Ilyich.”

What amazed Steve was that he could understand the Russian and Peter understood his English. Behind them the music of the concerto continued to fill the room.

“You know, Steve, we have many things in common,” he said with a shrug, “maybe due to our birth dates, but I do babble on. Let’s stop for a minute, while you make us some tea.”

Steve went into his small kitchen, filled the kettle with water, and lit the gas under the kettle.

“I dreamed of meeting you, but now that you’re here I don’t know what to say, or what to ask you.”

The water had come to a boil on the stove. Steve put cups, saucers, spoons, tea bags, sugar, and lemon on the table. He poured the hot water into their cups and sat down across from his newfound friend.

“The tea is good, but I would have preferred it in a glass. Oh well,” he said as he held the cup in both hands and sipped the hot liquid. Suddenly he stopped drinking and looked directly at Steve.

“Let me tell you, my friend, I know how depressed you are over your writing. I also understand what it feels like to have lost Andrew, his leaving you after the years of love and commitment you had for each other.”

He put down the cup and seemed to listen intently to the music. The cadenza was playing. Tchaikovsky's thoughts seemed very far away. He closed his eyes and ran his hand through his thick hair.

“I often think what would have happened to me and my music if I had not been helped by Nadejda von Meck. I was always, even as a small boy, emotionally headstrong, and I constantly needed acceptance. Yes, I loved Moscow, more than Paris or New York.”

He stopped and sipped some more tea.

“Oh, then there were my sexual needs and longings. Only my brother Modest understood them. But through all this, with encouragement by Nadejda and especially Modest, I kept composing. Listen, Steve, to that beautiful second movement of my concerto.”

He stopped to drink more of his tea. Steve sat looking at him and said nothing.

“Steve, you have a great gift as a storyteller. I have read many of your works.”

Steve interrupted, “How could you have read my works?”

“There is much in the world that you will never understand. I told you we were soul mates. From time to time I look in on many who were born on my birthday, just to see how they are doing. But very few invite me to share their time and space, as you did, even for a little while.”

Pyotr put down his cup. “It’s almost time for me to go. Think about what I said to you about your gifts. Maybe you need a new style, a new idea. You could write about our meeting? To find someone to love, that will not be easy, you must keep looking. I know from my own experience that he is out there.”

“How I wish you could stay longer. I don’t know how to tell you how wonderful your visit has been,” Steve said as he got out of his chair. Overcome with emotion, he put his arms around Tchaikovsky and hugged him.

“Maybe we will meet again when you finish your book,” Tchaikovsky said as he put on his coat and hat and took his gloves. He opened the door of the apartment. “Just listen to that last movement of the concerto, those beautiful last bars.”

He closed the door behind him as the music came to an end.

Steve stood silently in the dark, quiet apartment. Outside his window, the falling snow reflected the last rays of the pale winter sun. The ice crystals sparkled like jewels on the sidewalk.

*George Rubin*

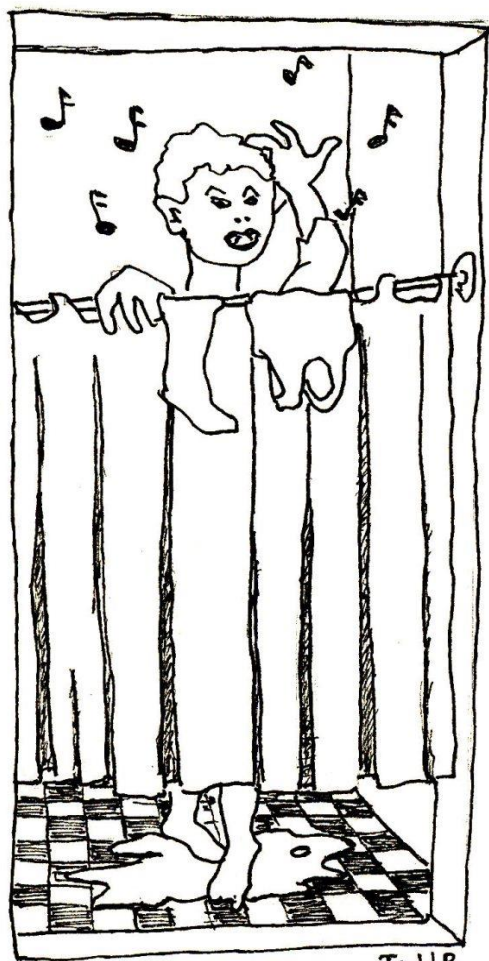
## MR. CLEAN

**A**s an ex GI, at one point I was studying in Paris. To make ends meet, I had to pinch every penny, despite the fact Paris was considered very inexpensive in those post-war years. I had found a nice room in a small hotel in the St. Germaine-des-Pres area. The room came with a washbasin, but the toilet was down the hall. To bathe, I had to use the local bathhouse. The charge allowed me a fair amount of time to bathe and to do my laundry. I would arrive after classes when there were never more than two people using the bathhouse. Under the pants and shirt I was to leave the bathhouse in, I'd layer my dirty second set of clothes, as well as my soiled underwear and socks. In a waterproof bag, I carried my clean under things and strapped the bag beneath my belt. So, under my trench coat, both coming and going, I appeared to be a rather stocky guy.

Beginning with soaping my hair, I'd let the suds run down over all I was wearing. I then dropped each article of clothing to the floor and tramped the suds through all the pieces. Each piece was separately rinsed. To cover any sounds made, I kept up a lusty singing of a cowboy song! Oddly, the only other person using the shower close by was a Frenchman who always joined in my singing with a bit of an accent, but a good lusty voice! That is all I know of him. We never entered nor left the bathhouse at the same time.

Once all my laundry was done, I'd pack the wet pieces into the waterproof bag and leave, the same chubby guy that entered, but definitely cleaner.





*Todd Butler*

## RERUNS AND RETREADS

After her fourteenth face lift  
When her features went astray,  
Kay, the famous actress,  
had it done in cloisonné.

Ladies with mustaches,  
Men with hairy ears,  
Have gotten twenty lashes  
From their advancing years.

A new knee at forty-three,  
A new hip at fifty.  
Won't it be nifty  
To have a transplant for whifty!

We can assuage some effects of age  
But some just will not soften.  
It's best to listen to the sage:  
"Don't use the mirror often."

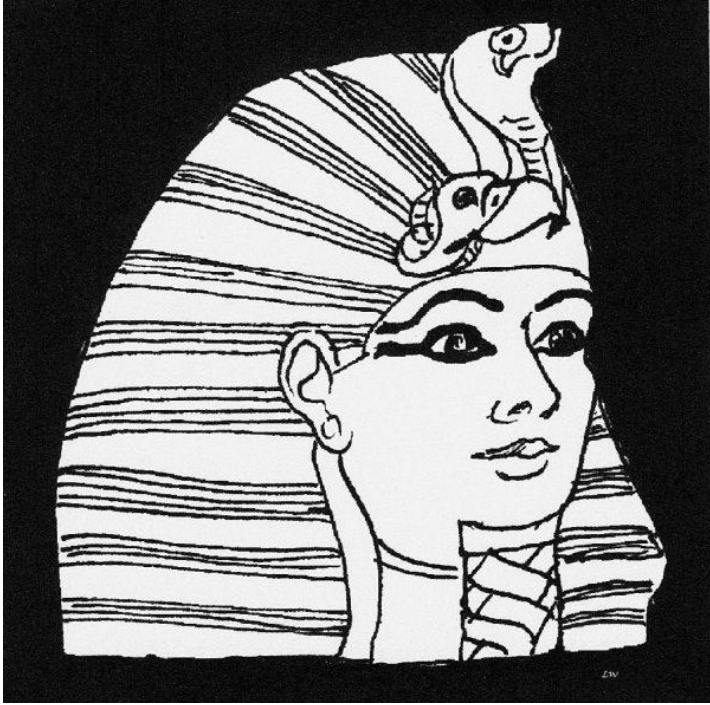
You must mix calcium with your scones  
In ever increasing doses.  
Sticks and stones will break your bones  
As will osteoporosis.

Do not despair if you lose your hair:  
Nothing is ever static.  
You must rejoice if you lose your voice:  
It was never operatic.

Don't go and pay a ransom  
To have a curly head.  
Instead of getting drop-dead pretty.  
Watch out – you might drop dead.

*William Pickering*





## THE MASK OF TUTANKHAMEN

The Child-King has begun his eternal journey.  
The lord of heaven and earth,  
He is traveling our Mother River's waters  
Into the arms of eternal, divine blessing.

The priests stir; now the world readies  
The suite of splendor for his safe journey.  
In silence, the robed priest lays down bars of gold,  
Lifting sacred goodness onto the ancient's bench.

From the shadows of a thousand years  
Steps the artist-smith,  
One of many generations of his skill.  
His hands are worked like hard bronze;  
His strong hands of fine grace  
Will mold the living mask.  
Silent nodding in the low necropolis  
Stirs the fire in the honored forge.  
The fire of the forge and the lamp blaze in his eyes.  
His two sons join him at his side.  
They, too, will work the gold.

Deep knowledge is their guide  
As the gold is worked into the sacred sheets.  
With hammer in hand, nay, many hammers,  
They shape the living likeness.  
The sons watch the father and tend the fire.  
Then the father tutors his sons  
As each in turn takes up the hammers, the knowledge.  
The tutor gathers in his touch, love,  
And in his strong hands, recitations.  
They work in watchful attention;  
Time is no measure of their strength and skill.

As they are faithful workers in life,  
Faithfully the living details are hammered  
Into the gleaming mask of eternity.

At last, their work is complete.  
The father takes up the likeness,  
Inviting each son to know the divine, living face.  
The father and sons withdraw into the shadows,  
Holding and honoring the thousand years of knowledge  
Which graces their work of love.  
The waning fire in the forge burns low,  
Reflected in the soft, gleaming image.

Up and down the streets of the necropolis,  
Laborers of the sacred throne in the ways of art  
Retire from their finished work.  
Their work of thousands of sacred objects  
Secures to the Child-King his safe journey.  
The delicate furnishings will bless his nether life,  
Eternal pleasures for his delight.

With long, slow steps, the solemn  
White-robed Osiris' priests gather the sacred objects  
They move out of the night of the necropolis  
Into the morning of the Valley of the Kings.  
In their slow and sand-swept procession,  
They sing hymns of praise and glory to Tutankhamen,  
Holding high the mask, the golden, living image.

*Chris Darlington*

## NICE OF YOU TO SAY SO, BUT. . .

**“Y**ou must be so proud!”

I heard those familiar words, more than once, after our daughter appeared on stage at Medford Leas last fall. Knowing they were well intentioned and sincere, I properly smiled and said thank you. That routine ended the matter for the speaker, but not for me. I assented because even momentary hesitation about being proud of my youngest child would demand an explanation and complicate what should be a simple exchange. Yet whenever someone congratulates me in this manner, it takes an effort not to qualify my response. Here are my problems.

First, I have three children, whom I love and treasure equally. That one performs in the concert hall while the others make their contributions to family and society outside the limelight gives the performer an unfair advantage in the public esteem. But unfairness is also reality, and even as I acknowledge the plaudits for her I recognize my complicity in devaluing my other children by default. How to avoid doing so without trying people’s patience is my recurring dilemma.

Then there’s the larger issue of pride itself. I have a habit of scrutinizing rituals (sometimes quite cynically) even when submitting to them for convenience. Consenting to be proud of my child, even were she my only one, is a ritual I’m particularly uncomfortable with. Something’s not quite right, it seems to me, with the concept of one person being proud of another.

This is not an exercise in semantics. Never mind how pride is defined in the dictionary, or how it ranks on the register of cardinal sins. The important thing is that these kind well-wishers are expressing two thoughts without articulating either one. (Let's skip over "She played beautifully," or "I so enjoyed listening to her," which sometimes precedes the call to pride.) First thought, "Your daughter is successful," meaning she has gained status in her field, her success the greater because the field is so brutally competitive. But I hold that *her* success, taken in isolation, no more entitles *me* to be proud than if the performer had been Vladimir Horowitz or Serena Williams. Then there's the second thought, that *I deserve credit* by virtue of being her father. I call this credit by parenthood. How, supposedly, have I earned it? Contributed a substantial part of her DNA? OK. Encouraged her to play from childhood on? OK. Paid for her lessons, and driven her to her teacher's home and back? OK. Paid for her undergraduate education at conservatory? OK. (She earned and paid for her own graduate studies.) Offered unconditional love during the difficult, stumbling, often discouraging ascent to the top? OK. Dealt quietly with my own ambivalence – so that I could continually assure her of my support no matter what – as she struggled with the decision whether to continue or chuck it all for a different vocation? Yes, all that. But millions support their children in all those ways; it's what parents do. Yet if the children don't reach the top, only the most insightful observers will stop their parents in the hallway and tell them they should be proud (of the effort, one assumes). The critical difference is *success*, and that belongs exclusively to my



daughter. It was she who studied, she who competed, she who dealt again and again with rejection, she who agonized over her prospects, and she who, in the end, found recognition. It is she who should be proud. I can only be thankful.

If only people would say, “You must be so thankful!”

I’d have no trouble with that.

There’s a subtext to parental pride in their children. It is *possession*. The possessive *my* can denote different relationships. My finger belongs to me; my friend does not, and neither does my child. It is easy for parents – especially those of limited accomplishment in their own right – to blur the distinction. The temptation to achieve vicariously through a gifted child can be hard to resist, and it is dangerous. If I depend on my daughter to fulfill *my* ambition, I risk investing irrationally in the effort, driving her crazy, and being irrationally proud of her success or disappointed in her failure, because I’m thinking of those outcomes as my own. How many of us can claim to be free from this sort of self-deception? If anyone suggested that I myself am guilty, I’d have to think carefully before denying it, for of all the things missing from my incomplete childhood none has caused me more regret than not having learned an instrument. I could be accused – without justification, I’d like to think, because of my genuine love for music – of urging my children to practice their instruments because no one urged me at their age. Being aware of that hazard gives

me extra incentive not to claim as mine that which doesn't belong to me.

Khalil Gibran had this to say about children:

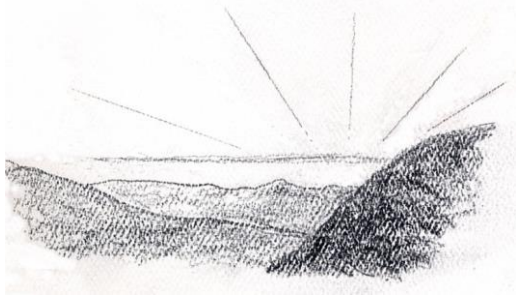
*Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but not their thoughts.  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like  
you.  
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.  
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are  
sent forth.  
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He  
bends you with  
His might that His arrows may go swift and far.  
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow  
that is stable.*

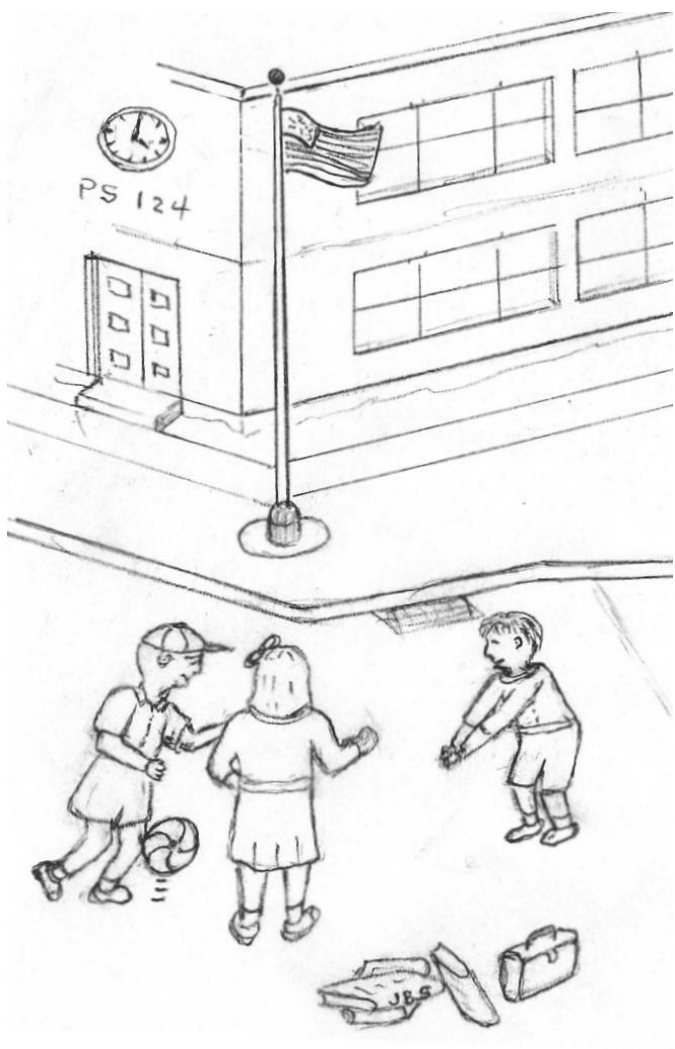
It occurs to me that the central thesis of this verse would make a fitting companion piece to the Fifth Commandment. It has helped me understand my relationship both with my parents and with my adult children.

## VISITS

Those we loved  
Who have passed away  
Visit us  
In our dreams.  
We awake refreshed.

*Laura Farr*





## **PLAY**

They laughed and leapt and chased and flew  
O'er the clay, the court, the grass.  
Books in piles, jackets too.  
Children playing after class.

Hopping, jumping, squealing, joy.  
See them play, lad and lass.  
Tossing balls, both girl and boy  
Children playing after class.

The sun less warm, the sky less blue,  
As time for dinner closer drew.  
Life will never be, alas,  
Like children playing after class.

*Steve Denham*

## CAT NAP

A sleeping kitten,  
as a handful of lint,  
still dreams

dreams of grandeur. The chase.  
The hunt. And as she dreams  
her little legs, dance  
a dance of her dream.

*Steve Denham*



## THE JERSEY DEVIL

Well, now what do you want to hear about? My talking dog? How I danced my way past a very dangerous patient? How, after forty some odd years, I unlocked the secret of elevator dreams? No. I'll tell you about the voices. If you're not a clinical psychologist like I was, you probably think I'm talking about actors or baritones or your mother's voice when she scolded you. But I am talking about those secret voices that no one else ever heard. Those voices come from the stapler in the drawer or through the wall. They had led many of our patients from their ordinary lives to the closed ward of the hospital where I worked. These voices exposed shameful secrets or uttered Mafia-like threats. They uttered commandments to burn churches. These were loud, clamorous insistent voices although you, or even the staff, might not notice anything at all amiss.

However, I had been exposed to patients cowering in response, checking out my radiators, stretching their ears towards an empty wall. These voices were reality for them. As for me, a trained observer, I could imagine those racing thoughts, euphoric or threatening. I could empathize with them, imagine them, but hear the slightest whisper? If I squinted my eyes or tilted my head, I could almost imagine a ghost or misrepresent a shadow. But voices? Never! That is until the Jersey Devil invaded my life.

The better part of my one hundred mile trip was behind me. I had already passed through the farmlands of new Jersey and crossed the bridge taking me to New

York and the long planned visit to a girlhood friend. How little we anticipate trouble when our mood is upbeat and all is peaceful about us. The day was clear and I was humming along with the radio. In an instant my comfort was shattered. A thunderous voice screamed at me, "This is the Jersey Devil and I am watching you."

This was a real voice, a first class voice. No staticky something, no hidden fears. No looming shadows. Just the realist reality. No imagination! No terrified thought! I checked out the radio, the heater, the horn. I realized something was amiss. There was no reason for anyone, real or imaginary, to be after me, especially in Prospect Park. "Of course, it must be a CB," I said to myself. "I just happened to pick up a passing truck." But there was no truck, no funny aerial, no CB as the Jersey Devil pursued me up Flatbush Avenue or down Avenue J or wherever I was. The park seemed to quiet him down.

I soon arrived at my friend's home and our first hugs wiped out the earlier terrifying moments. We had a lovely visit chatting away about all the good times we had over the years. By the time I left, I had forgotten all about him. But had he forgotten me?

Not on your life! Hurling down the Turnpike en route home, once more his booming voice shattered the quiet of the evening, leaving me both perplexed and uneasy but with my ego intact.

A month or so afterward, backing out of my garage en route to work, I heard this shout, "This is the Jersey Devil. What are you doing? What are you doing?" Not a threat, but a long conversation between the Devil and an



unseen person...unless the Devil himself was hearing voices. He spoke and then there were long pauses until he spoke again, responding to something I could not hear. By the nature of the intermittent remarks, it seemed that the Devil was giving instructions to a sick adolescent whose name I did not know and whose voice I had not heard. Later when I told my colleagues, friendly engineers, electronic whizzes, only to be greeted by a pat on the head and a skeptical, "Sure. Sure. And you're the one with the keys!" This would have been only the beginning or the end of a puzzling episode had I not been driving one such unbelieving, middle-aged whiz- kid one night when the Jersey Devil once more announced himself and my friend, Bob, heard him, too! Somewhat anticlimactically, he explained that an illegal CB had been broadcasting in my neighborhood while I had been recording a Pavarotti concert and the real "devil" had been close and on the same wavelength.

I could listen to my tape worry-free, but he continued to intrude on my tape, but more annoyingly on the little TV in my kitchen. Quietly, he broke up the picture. Did I continue to believe in him? You can bet your life I did until...one day he was boasting about the illegal tower he had built and proceeded to dictate his call letters. I wrote to Washington to report his illegal operation, only to be informed I had to buy a new TV and toss out the recording. Do I still believe in the Jersey Devil? Yes, I do, but I fear he lives in Washington.

*Beatrice Smolens*



## LET'S GO TO THE MOVIES

**M**emo to Friends of Cinema at Medford Leas:

A friend of mine who worked at the Motion Picture section of the Library of Congress, and who had written his PhD dissertation on dance in cinema, told me, "The greatest musical ever made on film was *The Band Wagon*." That is certainly not a crazy thing to say, but it is likely to spark debate by those who would choose otherwise. For example, a great many say *Singing In The Rain* is the best of all. I vote for both of them.

The two movies share a lot of things: Cyd Charisse, for example, and the writers; and both movies (in successive years) were from "the Freed unit," an MGM sub-set that cranked out a set of musicals that still dazzle the eyes. Then you could go on to argue Gene Kelly vs. Fred Astaire. Yet "The Musical" (as box office receipts announced) was losing its popularity as folks glued themselves to the funny little box and tuned their dial to *I Love Lucy*.

But there's no way to argue that this is the best musical ever made unless you share with the writers, Betty Comden and Adolf Green (who worked together for over 60 years), their love of film history, along with their keen sense of the ridiculous. For *Band Wagon* is a spoof-musical, a kind of loving parody, lavishly guilty of the same "sins" it ridicules – and that makes the more sense, the more "sraight" musicals you have seen. [See *The New York Musicals of Comden and Green*, 2006]

So you could like *Band Wagon* because you don't like musicals.... or because you *do*. (Go for the second choice.)

What follows is not an argument for greatness, but rather a set of notes and comments on a wonderful Something. It is based on a set of film notes I wrote for a screening of the film by the Dartmouth Film Society in their main auditorium. I was a (faculty) member of the DFS Directorship, and we all took turns every year writing a set of notes for the films we showed in the series we devised – these were handed out at the door; you could tell if people liked your notes or even read them by how many were left at the seats or even projected as paper airplanes!

So perhaps you should save these notes (no airplanes!) and hope that we might have a chance to watch this wonderful film together. ---atg

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### ***THE BAND WAGON* (MGM,1953)**

Directed by Vincente Minnelli. Written by Betty Comden & Adolph Green; Produced by Arthur Freed; Art Director, Cedric Gibbons; Costumes by Mary Anne Nyberg; Musical direction by Adolph Deutsch; Dances and musical number staging, Michael Kidd; songs by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz.

Fred Astaire     ...     Tony Hunter

Cyd Charisse	...	Gabrielle Gerard
Oscar Levant	...	Lester Marton
Nanette Fabray	...	Lily Marton
Jack Buchanan	...	Jeffrey Cordova

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*So here we go with some film history, tracing the DNA of our musical, and then looking at some of the high spots in its final version.*

**Back to the Future: *The Bandwagon*** [one word] 1931

Yes, the first musical of that name, by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, was a Broadway “revue,” not a movie. It starred the brother-and-sister act of Fred and Adele Astaire. [The Smithsonian issued a “phono disk” from the show in 1979 by reconstructing the musical numbers, drawing from various recordings in private collections; it provides a rare chance to hear the couple in their early twenties.] In those days, Adele was the one that got the raves, and Fred got the nod as supporting her very well. Both their voices are thin, reedy – very fashionable for the sweet young thing she was, and the nimble juvenile he was, and also part of the fashion of the day, where “romantic” songs tended to be warbled in the higher tessituras. (As far as I can tell, it was not explained and never has been explained what the title means.)

The Smithsonian album also has some swell pictures, including a certain Tilly Losch in a voluptuous gown of gold, doing a balletic solo number. It was she

who performed “Dancing in the Dark” by herself with a corps de ballet in the background and a baritone singer. In her “Beggar Waltz” number, Fred Astaire falls asleep outside the Viennese Opera House and dreams he is dancing with the star ballerina, Losch. But one of the more popular numbers was “I Love Louisa” in mock-Deutsch mit der stein und der danzenspiel, with Adele padded like a Fraulein and Fred giving rouses with the boys.

If you're thinking by now, “big-time recycling,” you've got it. The show was deconstructed and reconstructed by Schwartz & Dietz and Comden & Green. To be sure, bringing ballet into pop entertainment was a familiar trope, the cultural equivalent of taming the shrew; but there was so much more. In the movie, “I Love Louisa” is now sung by Astaire at the cast-party mourning/celebrating their apparent flop, and gives us a chance to see Nanette Fabray at her comedic best. But “The Beggar's Waltz” is now, simply, the score for Cyd Charisse's (fairly embarrassing) gyrations as ballet star – and Astaire sits in the audience and is abashed by her unattainable talent. When “New Sun In the Sky” occurs in the 1931 revue, it is sung by Fred Astaire in his dressing room, admiring himself in the mirror and dressing to go out. Alec Wilder in his *American Popular Song* says, “It's so very good, so exactly what it sets out to be that had I written it, I would have been complacent for months.” But it only appears briefly in the movie, in the opening hischlock number for Cyd Charisse who sings (dubbed by India Adams) one chorus.

Strictly speaking, a revue has no real story line; it is a sequence of sketches. And the transmogrification later afforded by Comden and Green included a preposterous over-plotted high-art musical drama (“Faust for the modern age”), exploded (as it were), and then, when everything was sorted out, put forward once again as a plotless musical revue! Which in the movie was going to be a huge hit, just as the first *Bandwagon* was a lavish success (that first revue was also Adele Astaire's last appearance on the stage – she was two years older than Fred, and retired to marry an English lord...never danced again). Funnily enough, the plotless musical revue was thenceforth expropriated by television. But not before producing a row of Hollywood variations. Which leads us to:

**Back to the Future: *Broadway Melody of 1940***  
[DVD from Amazon.com]

Can't do much better here than to quote John Mueller's definitive study, *Astaire Dancing* (1985): “*Broadway Melody Of 1940* is most notable for the terrific tap routines, for the absurdly overblown production numbers, for the sexlessness of the central love story, and for the insipidity of the character Fred Astaire plays.” Then again, there is Frank Sinatra’s “You can wait around and hope, but you'll never see the likes of this again.” Which I suppose is true, but let's have another one for the road, Frank. Or as Astaire put it, “It was a big Metro mess, but it was fun to do at the time.”

*Broadway Melody Of 1940* is a kind of filmunculus (or original DNA) of *The Bandwagon* of 1953 (both are

MGM musicals). And the extended production number of its finale, *Begin the Beguine* is the *filmunculini* of the filmunculus: the situation is a presumed concluding act in a hugely popular Broadway revue, with several musical arrangements strung together of Cole Porter's 1935 hit. The leading female star, Eleanor Powell, comes on first, while a mezzo warbles a high-art version of the song and Powell postures *en pointe*. Yes, she had ballet training, and yes, she included ballet sequences in her dances. She had a major career as a dancer in her own right, and was meeting Astaire for the first time in this movie — hence, she was very much in the position of Cyd Charisse's Gaby. Furthermore, the ballet-part is almost beyond parody (almost), and illustrates nicely the adjective, “pretentious.” Nothing can ruin Porter's basic tune, but they certainly tried. The solo then segues into a Spanish sequence, where Astaire appears dressed like a picador or a piccolo, or whatever, and they begin a kind of middlebrow Latino/ballroom dance. This is elegant and cool (= “not very sexy”), though the spectacularly talented dancing of Eleanor Powell looks very best in long shot (put it this way: the camera does not love her, um, face). But then there's a brief vamp with four females, visually and aurally a crazy mix between Carmen Miranda and the Andrews sisters, *and then* (the sequence preserved on the anthology-film, *That's Entertainment*): Powell and Astaire are back to do the most brilliant double-solo virtuoso exhibition of tap you could hope to see — and they are dressed informally, the music is big-band Artie-Shaw-style swing. In this sequence, then, we have the seed of the comic and cultural plot of the 1953 *The Band Wagon*. “Ahht” has its cultural moment



(snicker) and then dresses down to "fun set to music."  
That's entertainment!!!

***The Band Wagon*** [two words] 1953 (DVD:  
Two-Disc Special Edition, Amazon.com)

The separate number, "*That's Entertainment*," was one of the few new pieces of music composed for the recycled *Wagon*. And the words serve to illustrate the comic-serious argument of Comden-Green: if "art" means taking yourself too seriously, no one will stay happy very long. Lighten up, kick up your heels, enjoy. Their story has great fun with Jeff Cordova and his pretensions. (Very few know that the actor was Jack Buchanan, who was a British hoofer, the Fred Astaire of England you might say, and whom Astaire had seen dance in London in 1921 and been much impressed by. Buchanan's career was actually closest to Tony Hunter's in the movie.) So just as the ballet star learns to swing and sway the Astaire way, so does the genius director limit himself to a bit of loose-limbed tie-and-tails softshoe with feckless Fred.

The long and the short of it is that this musical or anti-musical is a cathedral of the church of Fred Astaire. A surprising amount of his numbers, beginning with his first song (not a dance), is about going solo. Spectacular example: "A Shine On Your Shoes" in the 42d street Penny Arcade. MGM was notorious for its confined dancing spaces: Astaire has all the space he needs starting from the shoeshine stand, and transforms everything he dances at (not with) with hopping, happy energy. So it is all the more moving to discover that the

greatest romantic dance in the history of cinema (as *Dance Magazine* once argued) is provoked by his need to see “if he can dance with someone...” (he had just made his last movie with Ginger Rogers): and that answer would be discovered while “Dancing in the Dark.”

Notice how that question is resolved. Astaire proposes that he and Gaby, who have not been hitting it off well, to say the least, agree to go to a nightclub to do some relaxed dancing together, but instead they wind up in a horsecab and are taken into Central Park. Disembarking, they come upon an open-air dance floor (who knew?) with a sweet-sounding band and happy couples. (Incidentally, the dance band is playing “High and Low,” a hit tune from the 1931 revue. Waste not, want not.) But it’s not their zone; like sleepwalkers, they stroll further into a private area of fine gravel and grass, quietly illuminated. Each tries out a beginning dance-gesture. An invisible orchestra strikes up “Dancing in the Dark.” Gravely, tentatively, they face each other, dancers’ parade-rest. And they begin. First, it’s coordinated dancing, not touching each other. But as they dance, they come together.... and, we see, begin to fall in love. And not a word is said.

So it's not just “fun put to music.” It’s craft and strength, enormously hard work, pattern and discipline. And movement in rhythm (*Steps In Time* is the title of Astaire's autobiography), with fluidity and a graceful line. And sex, of course. And wordless bliss. And from time to time someone sends in the clowns.

*Alan Gaylord*

## A SHY TROUBADOUR'S LAMENT

Enlisted in this family we call humankind,  
I take no risk in hiding self in place.  
Taking all care and diligence to trace  
Life's hopes, I leave all lesser things behind.

Take note the point at which we balance love;  
Find joy in that beat of hearts in thumping chest.  
You lift me up beyond myself in bliss-filled rest,  
And drop me down so gently, gently from above.

That's how love comes to me, in melodious staves,  
Whether you come intent to bless or chide.  
With cloak to shield my mind, and self to hide,  
We meet, half unknown, on Ocean's boist'rous waves.

So let me take you in my heart of hearts,  
And lean upon your soul with loving touch.  
If you tell me of my failure in this much,  
I'll cast my chastened love in other parts.

*Chris Darlington*

## BIRTH

Warm. Soft.

Comfortable.

It's time –

Darkness into light,  
bright light.

strange sounds.

Eyes opening – blurred.

Try the muscles,

move the arms,

move the legs.

Shapes moving – focus.

A face, looking into yours.

Hot cloths. Steam.

A shape. An offering,

Round, white, desirable.

Lips quiver. Arms reach. Awareness!

Lips contact. Suck. Ah bliss.

Thank God! Coffee!

*Steve Denham*



## **ALLY, ALIEN**

Ally, alien  
Alien, ally  
Which is which  
And when and why?  
Watch my hips  
Read my lips  
And you'll know  
Which is which or which is witch  
Or vice-versa  
As I switch  
From witch to witch  
As to which is witch  
It's easy  
Just read my lips

## **ME**

Convention bade the changing of my name  
I did not fight it to my shame  
As we parted ways I kept the name this time  
that indeed is no longer mine  
And now in life's third stage  
euphemistically called the golden age  
My first name you see  
Is the only real me

*Lori Berliner*

## ALONE

### A Story

“**S**o you’re going to run away? I bet!” It was a statement directed at Tommy by his older brother, Bill. They were sitting around the supper table, Tommy, Bill, Betsy and Mom and Dad.

Things were going badly, as they usually did when Bill and Tommy were forced, as it regularly happened at mealtime, to engage in close range conversation. That was when Bill delighted in goading his brother. That was the word his mother used when trying to get Bill to stop.

But it was too much fun. Tommy was seven, Bill six years older. And it was so easy to get a rise out of Tommy, another one of Mother’s expressions, by teasing and mocking his brother. It didn’t help, either, that Bill was the favorite of Dad and Mother. The only time they ever said anything critical to him was when he was being a bully. Even then it wasn’t enough to make him really stop.

Actually, Mother and Dad seemed to take Bill’s side! Tommy’s birthday, his present. Not the model airplane Tommy had been longing for. Instead, socks and a shirt! Clothing that he would have gotten anyway. Everybody knew that what Tommy wanted more than anything else was a balsawood model airplane kit from McLaughlin’s Hardware Store. Bill said Tommy wasn’t old enough to be trusted with a razor blade and model airplane Superglue, and that the plane would crash and

break up on its first flight, and that the money would be wasted. Mother and Dad agreed. They always agreed with Bill.

This time the mood at the table was really bad. Bill was touching Tommy's chair and pushing it ever so slightly. Tommy shouted with every shove. So he was moved to the other side and Betsy brought around to keep Bill company. Bill gloated. Betsy, in her wise five-year-old way, just watched.

That was when Tommy announced he was running away. He would just leave. Then everyone would be really sorry that they had been mean. Just wait and see!

Instead, Bill laughed. Then he could have the bedroom all to himself.

Betsy said, "What are you going to eat?"

"Worms!" shouted Bill. "Big fat juicy worms!"

"Stop it," Mother said, looking at Bill but half smiling, as if the thought of Tommy eating worms was funny. Tommy knew he couldn't win. Dad didn't say anything. He never did at times like this.

So the "plan" began forming in Tommy's mind. This time he would really show them and really do it.

The night was dark and cold. Tommy changed from his pajamas into the pants and shirt he had hidden in the shrubs just under the bathroom window. The discarded pajamas were bundled up and stuffed out of sight between the bush and the house. The socks and sneakers that he had hidden there, along with the rest of

his outfit, went onto his feet, and he was ready to take off. An apple in his pants pocket was to eat when he got hungry. A fat change purse of allowance money, saved for this moment, swung heavily, and reassuringly, in the other pocket.

The escape was planned carefully. Into the bathroom! Lock the door! Then climb out through the window, and drop (it was a short drop) to the ground!

The next steps were not as carefully planned. He knew his home block and the road into town from the hill. It turned into a street, the one at the end of block where Tommy lived. He knew all the nearby streets because that's where he played with his friends. The hill he knew because of visits to the hill top cemetery and the Fourth of July fireworks display in a park up there. He also knew about hitchhiking. People did that everywhere all the time. He would hitchhike a ride to Pittsburgh, or maybe to the county airport where he could watch the planes land and take off.

What he didn't know was how quiet and dark and cold the night would be. The corner streetlights weren't much help. Across the river in the distance lights twinkled.. The sky was full of stars but the shadows around him were very dark. He hadn't even thought of bringing the flashlight from the bathroom cabinet. He heard a train down along the river. Its whistle sounded so far away.

Tommy also knew that there was a curfew for kids to be off the streets at night. If anyone saw him it would be the end of his running away plan. So he ran and hid at



the same time. It made him feel funny. A little bit scared. Not like the brave young man he wanted to be.

He finally reached the hill road. It took longer than he thought it would. And he noticed that there weren't many cars. Just one or two. He was afraid to be seen. It would be hard to hide and hitchhike at the same time. Besides, the last car on the road came around the curve so suddenly and so close to the edge that he was afraid to stand there.

He didn't know what to do. He had never been out, alone, at night before, and it was scary. Frightened and miserable, he crouched out of sight along the embankment.

A car drove up, moving very slowly, with a spotlight beam sweeping along the grass where Tommy was hiding. It landed right on him.. A man's voice said, "Hey there, son. Where do you think you're going?" The voice sounded friendly.

Tommy was blinded by the light and couldn't move. The voice said, "I'm a policeman. Come along with me. We'll go back to the station and talk. Come on." Turning off the spotlight, the officer stepped down to help Tommy get into the police car. Up front. It felt so warm and smelled so good.

They rode in silence all the way back to the station. Tommy had walked past those round blue lights, one on each side of door, many times on his way to Islay's ice cream store but he had never walked between them into the station. He had no idea of what to expect.

What he saw was Dad and Mother waiting on a bench in the hallway. Mother rushed up and wrapped her arms around him, crying. Dad's eyes were shiny, too, as he hugged him. But he didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

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Dr. Thomas Black, Professor Emeritus of Aeronautical Engineering, lay on the hospital bed, hooked up like a spaceman to life support systems. He was very tired. He knew that at any moment, perhaps tonight, the body would fail and he would step into the unknown. He remembered that boyhood flight, its otherworldliness and of being alone under the stars. He wondered if it would be like that. Will I see the stars? Will there be arms to welcome me?

*by Stanley Brush*