

LEAS LIT

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THIS ISSUE IS DEDICATED TO RUTH BARKER GAGE 1925 - 2022

Before she had even moved to the Lumberton Campus, the first of her two homes at Medford Leas, Ruth Gage wished to work on campus publications. Herb Heine-
man, then sole editor of the *Campus Chronicle*, remembers a telephone call from a woman who “sounded serious” about working with him as soon as she arrived. Herb gladly accepted the offer, and Ruth became his second in command in 2006.

In 2007, Ruth joined the editorial staff of *Leas Lit*, the Medford Leas literary magazine, and became a frequent contributor as well. Fellow editors valued her concise criticisms; one noted that he always waited for her to explain exactly what the strengths and weaknesses of a piece were because she was always right.

Between December 2008 and December 2022, Ruth contributed nine prose pieces to *Leas Lit*. Some were frankly autobiographical, but several were fictionalized stories based upon her own experiences. “Right to the Door,” “London Britches,” and “Appropriate Education” described her growing up in Trenton. A horse drawn cart delivered milk, children played outdoors and made up their own games, and girls learned to cook and sew while boys learned to make (or at least fix) things. She described the details in a lively and humorous style.

Ruth was a skier, but “Learning to Ski” does not portray her mastering the sport. “Something to Tell the Grandchildren” is a third person account of travels in India from the point of view of the less vigorous of two women traveling together. Both pieces are laced with

self-deprecating humor. In “Polio,” about student nurses working with patients in iron lungs, she told the story in the third person but used her own nursing experiences. “Aftermath,” the story of Edward Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” ten years later, reveals Ruth’s marriage counseling experiences: advising quarreling couples on how to run a business, raise children, pay for the condo,” and still love each other. “The Balloon” narrates the life of a helium birthday balloon that Ruth endows with a personality as she records its activities. In her own words:

“As of this writing the balloon has been my companion for four months and nine days and is still sitting on the couch. I have no idea how long it will continue to survive. It certainly has proved an ideal roommate. It does not have to be fed, clothed, bathed, or walked. It has maintained a constant cheerful demeanor, frequently even being quite entertaining.”

“A Visit to God’s Hotel,” Ruth’s final submission, appears in this edition. She had worked on it into August of this year, keeping up with the developments at Laguna Honda, a San Francisco hospital. She combines a personal experience with her medical background and her deep commitment to social justice, all expressed in her inimitable style.

The December 2022 Edition of *Leas Lit* is dedicated to Ruth Gage, an editor from June 2007 to June 2022. The Medford Leas community and its publications benefited greatly from her literary talents. We are fortunate to have all the stories described above in our archives, accessible at mlra.org/literary-journal/.

The Editors

A VISIT TO GOD'S HOTEL

During the mid-1990s, Tony, my youngest son, lived in San Francisco and volunteered at Laguna Honda, initially established in 1866 as an “almshouse” for the many unsuccessful fortune seekers lured to California by the



Gold Rush. It became accredited as a hospital in 1963, but until recently this did not alter its long-term function as a dumping ground for the people that nobody wanted. This population increased over the years, and many buildings were added to accommodate them. Tony be-

longed to a local Buddhist organization that had renovated and employed professional staff for a unit for the terminally ill, mostly AIDS patients. He spent four hours a night once a week interacting with patients there who were still not bedfast. On one of my frequent trips to San Francisco, he invited me to visit the unit. I demurred; I did not want to intrude upon a ward for the terminally ill. He assured me that there would be no problem; my visit would give patients opportunity for another contact with a visitor, something many lacked.

In the early evening, I drove to the hospital, parked in an enormous parking lot, and found my way to the entrance Tony had designated. No one challenged me as I entered an enormous hallway thronging with people in various conditions and stages of mobility. It was clear to

them that I was somebody new and therefore someone of interest. I never felt frightened or threatened; their overall motivation for accosting me seemed to be curiosity, although there were numerous requests for cigarettes. As a nonsmoker, I could truthfully state that I had none. Interestingly, nobody asked me for money.

The patients asked me many questions about my own life and felt free to share the details of their own. After I told them my first name, they also wanted to know where I was from, what I was doing in San Francisco, my age, my occupation, my marital status, if I had children. Did I have a car? What kind was it? Was I saved? Had I ever been in jail? And many more questions I do not even remember.

Those in wheelchairs primarily described the nature of their disabilities, how long they had had them, and what treatments they had undergone. The one exception was from a gentleman completely swathed in blankets from the chest down. I could see that he had no legs, and he confided in me that the lower half of his body was also missing. I had no way of ascertaining the extent of his losses, so I accepted his statement.

The wheelchairs themselves varied widely. Some were the standard model, but others seemed to have been constructed from materials at hand. There were some people with canes or walkers as well, but most of the residents were ambulatory and busy with their own affairs, which at this moment included questioning me.

Those people whose thinking was notably disorganized or even bizarre were very creatively dressed. Most outstanding was a lady in an ornate (although

exceedingly shabby) long gown with a train. She also wore a tiara and confided in me that she was a member of the Swedish royal family. She pressed me not to reveal her circumstances to anyone as she was traveling incognito. A gentleman in oilskins was expecting to depart shortly for a long-term deep sea research project. I thought he must be awfully warm in that outfit as it was summer and there was no air conditioning.

I finally met Tony in the ward where he was volunteering. He gave me a brief tour of the unit, introduced me to several of the patients, and then departed to visit his regulars. I was immediately co-opted by Sarah, a young woman whose body was very twisted. Her head turned almost sideways, making it difficult for her to walk because she could not look straight ahead. She said she had been in an “accident” many years before, but I never learned any details of her medical history.

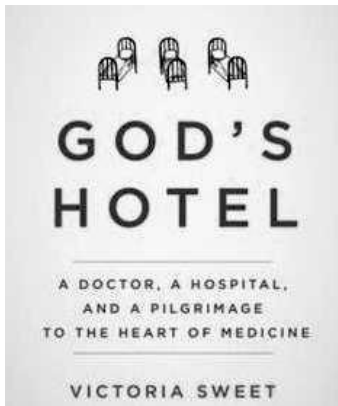
I spent the rest of my time on that unit with Sarah in the Art Room, where she showed me a whole series of her exquisite little watercolor paintings. Some of these were no bigger than a postcard, but all were of lovely, tranquil scenes of landscapes, some with water features, in beautiful detail. I asked her the location of these scenes. She told me that they were not places she had ever been but had visualized and then painted. I would have liked to buy one, but she would not part with any of them. I guessed they were her escape from surroundings that would never change until she died.

Finally I took my leave of Sarah, retracing my steps through the initial hallway, now considerably less populated because residents had returned to their various

wards, and found my car. I drove away, already planning to learn more about this facility, unique in my medical and counseling careers.

I continued to think about Laguna Honda and kept up with the changes that were happening there. Two important things happened. First, the Laguna Honda I had visited radically changed. It was partially demolished and refitted as a traditional hospital. Gone was the big building with its numerous wards connected to that large central hallway. Many of its long-term residents were transferred elsewhere, so the population was greatly reduced. Patients were treated in traditional wards and no longer gathered in halls to interrogate visitors.

Second, Victoria Sweet, MD, PhD, who worked as an internist at Laguna Honda for twenty years, wrote a



book about the facility as it operated when I visited. *God's Hotel* (published in 2013) compares Laguna Honda to the medieval *Hotel Dieu*, where religious of the Catholic Church housed and cared for the residents until they either healed or passed away. The able residents helped with the daily tasks of the in-

stitution such as gardening, cooking, and making their own clothes. This was also true of Laguna Honda in its earlier days.

Sweet called her medical practice at Laguna Honda “slow medicine.” It combined medical care with support

for daily existence. She was inspired by the philosopher Hildegard of Bingen, who followed the *Hotel Dieu* model. She believed that the human body is like a garden to be observed and tended. Sweet realized that modern physicians, too, needed time to pay attention to both patients and their surroundings, making sure that the latter were conducive to patients' physical and mental health. After 20 years at Laguna Honda, Dr. Sweet decided that the hospital system no longer allowed her to do that, and she moved on.

By the end of 2022, Laguna Honda is scheduled to close unless it can rectify several conditions that have made it ineligible for Medicaid and Medicare funding. 700 patients have been relocated, and the problems are not resolved. After 150 years, the city may no longer have a "God's Hotel."

Ruth Gage

THE BALCONY

If this room had a voice
it would sing a Fado,
a song of loss,
abandonment.

It might also celebrate
with songs of the past:
family gatherings
happier times.

But it has no voice.
Empty chairs, a table,
two walls, a door
share the silence.

Molly Gayley

WHO AM I?

Two women in a predominantly Italian neighborhood of South Philadelphia gave birth to daughters on the same day in the early 1900s. One woman's baby died shortly after being born and the other woman died soon after giving birth. The husband of the woman who died allegedly also died several months later in an accident. The living mother agreed to take the baby and raise her in her own family consisting of several other children, both boys and girls. The new baby was well received by the other children and the neighbors in the surrounding Italian community. Many of these persons were probably not aware that this baby was not the mother's own biological baby.

As the child developed, she attended the local Catholic parish school and was raised in the Roman Catholic religion. She received the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation along with all the other children in her class. After graduating from eighth grade, she decided she wanted to become a nun. Inexplicably, the nuns at the school where she had gone would not accept her as a potential member of their community. However, she was determined to become a nun and was able to find a different community of nuns who welcomed her. This community's primary location for training was in France. Thus, she was sent there as a novice to begin her studies to become a nun. She soon learned the language and the ways of the community. After five years when she was getting ready to profess her final vows, she became ill with digestive

problems and was sent back home to her family in Philadelphia.

She recovered from her illness, but she did not return to complete her requirements to become a nun. One of her brothers introduced her to one of his single Italian friends, and soon thereafter the two were married. The couple had several children who all did well in business ventures and became teachers, lawyers, and physicians. One had a distinct interest in art and others in the performing arts. One of their daughters became interested in genealogy and sent her DNA for analysis. The results came back showing her to be 25% of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.

Family members, along with friends and other relatives, searched their memories about those who had passed away to determine how this was possible. The conclusion was that this child's grandmother, who was raised, but not blood related, in this Italian Catholic family, was a 100% Ashkenazi Jew. Now, there is much excitement among family members concerning their newly discovered Jewish heritage.

Janet Siler

Note: This is a true story told to me recently by a friend.

MEMORIES OF AFRICA: WILD HONEY

Onto my porch one morning
Came a lean old African man,
In old clothes and barefoot, but pride in his stance,
Earning money whenever he can.

He had a tin pot full of wild bee honey.
I'd never seen its like before,
Full of wings and wax and little twigs,
And dead bees by the score.

He'd followed some bees to a tree trunk
And calmed them down with smoke.
And "Oh yes, they stung me many times."
He was smiling when he spoke.

His pride and his kindly gladness
Made me open to something new.
He explained how to heat it and sieve it,
So I purchased that fearsome brew.

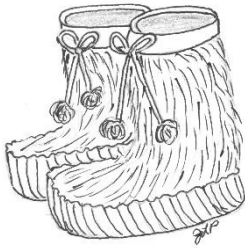
Of all the honeys I've ever had
That honey was the best,
Scented as it was with Africa,
And dipped from a wild bees' nest.

Edith Roberts



MUKLUKS AND UMIAKS

While reading an article the other day about artists in the Nunavut Territory, northern Canada, I came upon the word mukluks, and it didn't faze me a bit. In fact, it brought back warm memories. You see, I had an aunt and uncle who lived in Kotzebue, Alaska, and when they



would come home to visit family, they always brought presents. One year it was mukluks: boots made with animal skin. My sisters and I never lacked for “show and tell” stories for school after my aunt had been home for a visit. I've never been to Alaska, but I grew up on stories about it and the native people. I don't mean the Alaska that most people see when they go on cruises. The stories we heard were from the far north, a village 26 miles north of the Arctic Circle, where whale hunts, dog teams and native friends were common.

My uncle was a Navy dentist, and my aunt was a Navy nurse. They met at the US Naval Base in Kodiak, Alaska, in 1947. They married in 1948 and, after retiring from the Navy, returned to Alaska to work for the Territorial Department of Health. They were assigned to a ship as part of the Mobile Maritime Unit covering Kodiak Island up to Point Hope, providing dental care to the local populations. They did not have an auspicious beginning. A combination of circumstances led them to leave the ship at Point Hope. After they purchased an umiak (a large canoe-like boat with a motor) they made

plans to travel to Barrow. However, the motor failed, and they had to stay at Point Hope for a year. According to my uncle they were “adopted” by a local family in Point Hope who taught them the essentials of living off the land. For my uncle, that meant learning to hunt for food: seals, bowhead whales, walrus, and caribou. For my aunt, that meant learning to prepare the food and the skins or furs for clothing. For both, it meant subsistence living in a small (125 population) native village and depending on dogsleds and boats for hunting and transportation. They lived in an igloo that was loaned to them by the family for the cost of “resodding and fixing it up.” (An igloo can be any dome shaped structure, not necessarily of ice.)

After the thaw that summer of 1951, they left in their umiak along with their dogs and camping gear and spent about two months along the coast of Point Hope, stopping at various hospitable camping spots. They must have enjoyed it because after a year off for my uncle to attend postgraduate refresher courses at the University of Michigan they returned to Alaska, this time to an assignment in Barrow (the largest city in the north slope) where they established the first dental clinic at the hospital there. Then, in the winter of 1954 they were re-assigned to Kotzebue. They traveled there by dogsled from mid-January to March 1, leaving “before the sun had returned” (a trip of 335 miles by air). They stayed in Kotzebue for 10 years, working at the clinic and making trips every other year to visit each of the 11 outlying villages. As my uncle described it: “Airplane service was rapidly expanding so dog team travel was not used

except to Noatak, where it was an easy weekend trip of 70 miles.”

One of my aunt’s most notable trips was one that she made with friends along the coast of Alaska from Point Hope up to Barrow, across to the Canadian border and back to Kaktouik by umiak. My uncle was to go along, but at the last minute he had to take the annual exam for his dental license, so my aunt went ahead with the friends, and my uncle flew up to find them south of Barrow and continued the rest of the way with them. At that time (1956) she was undoubtably the first white woman to travel that far north in Alaska, particularly by boat!

Writing this has brought back fond memories of my aunt and uncle. I knew they had a different life than we did, but until I read my uncle’s letters, I had no idea of the extent of the primitiveness of their lives in the early years. It is a testament to their sense of adventure and their respect for the population. The natives were not only their patients but their friends. They left an extensive collection of native artifacts, as well as their own tools, boats and other items of interest from their life in Kotzebue, to the University of Fairbanks.

Jeanette Peterson

APRIL 19

Twenty-seven years ago this morning, at 9:02 am, the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City was bombed. One hundred sixty-eight people were killed, including nineteen children. More than 500 others were injured.

The Murrah Building stood on the 600 block of North Harvey, just a few blocks from the main Oklahoma City Library. After our family moved to Oklahoma City in 1953, I'd occasionally spend time in that library, although I preferred the branch closer to us.

I was more familiar with the Murrah building from the weekly vigils held at its front entrance for years by the small Oklahoma City peace community, composed of a handful of Quakers and some members of the Peace House, an active antiwar/social justice Catholic group. Every Wednesday morning for years, silently and prayerfully this small number of faithful individuals protested – holding their signs. They began their vigils during the years of the Vietnam War; later the vigils were held to protest US involvement in Central America.

After I was married, living in New Jersey, and raising or having raised three children, I'd visit my folks several times a year in Oklahoma City. Anytime those visits included a Wednesday, I'd join their vigil. Between Wednesdays my father would place in the yard in front of their house the wooden sign he used in the protests, to continue conveying the message he'd painted on it, be

it to “Stop the War in Vietnam” or “Opposing US Policy in Central America.”

When Mike and I awoke on the morning of April 19, 1995, to the shocking news and TV coverage of devastation in Oklahoma City, it was difficult to comprehend. At first I thought it was just some inappropriate war movie being shown here in the cheerful morning hours of the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where we were vacationing with my best friend from Olney Friends School days and her husband. I was in shock as I tried to piece together the reality that this warlike event had happened in Oklahoma City at the Murrah Building, and that very morning. And it was a Wednesday morning, when my folks and their friends would probably have been at that site.

Once I had gotten my head around what we were seeing, I started frantically calling my family there. No calls would go through. All lines were jammed. Hours went by as I called over and over. It wasn't until later that evening that we finally heard from my father that they were safe. What I hadn't known was that the protesters had ended their vigils at the Federal Building recently. After Clinton was elected and in office, their peace community felt he was more responsive to their concerns, and they laid down the weekly vigils at the Murrah Building to focus on more direct efforts to connect with the administration.

The uncertainty and horror of those hours of April 19, 1995, and its aftermath will always stay with me. When our whole family traveled to Oklahoma City two years later for the memorial service of my 94-year-old father,

we drove by the flower and memento covered fence enclosing what by then appeared as tidied up devastation. In successive years when I'd return for visits with my stepmother, I'd visit the memorial that had been built there, with its 168 empty chairs – crafted from glass, bronze, and stone – one for each of those who'd lost their life that day. The nineteen child-sized chairs for those who had been in the building's day care center that morning are especially heartrending to see.

In the years since, Mike and I have sometimes watched remembrances of that tragic day; one scene often shown especially touches home with us. It is of a stunned looking man, cautiously climbing down an escape ladder from the fifth floor but facing outward. That man, Dr Brian Espe, was a veterinary school classmate of Mike's at Oklahoma State for four years. His career had taken him to being the official head of ADE (Animal Disease Eradication) for USDA in that region. His offices were located on the fifth floor of the north side of the Murrah Building. Early that morning, he had gone into their conference room to put together a slideshow he would later be showing the Veterinary School students. He was there alone when the bomb exploded and was saved by ducking under the large conference table. Seven of the other ten members of Brian's staff were killed.

If you see a picture of the Murrah building that day after the bombing, it looks like something took a big bite out of the north side of this block-long brick building, leaving all the partially remaining rooms on that side completely open to the world, similar to a child's doll house.

Brian explained to us, when we saw him at a veterinary conference in Las Vegas several years later, that he was terrified of heights. He had had to be coaxed down that five-story tall ladder, one step at a time, by a fireman named Mark, and he could only handle going down by facing outward. Brian stayed in touch with that fireman until Brian died some years later. Often a glimpse of his descent is still shown on television stories of that day.

The date April 19 reverberates in my mind, much as 9/11 would six years later. That the bombing of the Murrah Building was domestic terrorism makes it, for me, especially foreboding in our very divisive times.

Ruth Podolin



*Oklahoma City National Memorial showing
Field of Empty Chairs in front of the Reflecting Pool*

HOW DO I GET TO CARNEGIE HALL?

Ed had left his office on 57th Street earlier than he had expected. It was Friday and he was tired of all the paperwork that he had to finish. Needing a break before going home, he wandered into the Russian Tea Room. Waiting for a table he thought, “this is a good time for a vodka and tonic and an early dinner.” The maître d’ led him to an empty table. Behind him were bright shining samovars that accented the ornate wall. The waiter took Ed’s order and shortly after brought him his vodka and tonic. For the first time that day, Ed felt relaxed as he sipped his drink. Out of nowhere a tall, elderly, well-dressed gentleman appeared at his table. His suit seemed to be early 20th century, accentuated by a colorful bow tie. When he smiled, his mustache seemed to rise up and his blue eyes sparkled.

“May I sit down with you?” he asked in a very casual manner. At first Ed was taken aback and hesitated, then he said, “Of course,” not sure why he had acquiesced. After the waiter had taken the new guest’s drink order, he said, “May I share a story with you?” Ed shrugged his shoulders, “Why not?”

“You know Carnegie Hall is right next door, and there is a lot of history there. When Andrew Carnegie was younger, his mother, Margaret, ruled every aspect of his life with an iron hand. He was unable to marry unless she approved of the woman.” He stopped, lit up a cigar, blew the smoke toward the ceiling, then continued. “He was fortunate at that time to have met and fallen in love

with Louise Whitfield, for shortly after, Margaret died, and without any hesitation Andrew married Louise.”

The stranger stopped and took a sip of his dry martini, and Ed followed, drinking his vodka and tonic. The gentleman put down his glass and continued, “Andrew wanted to give Louise a wedding present, a fabulous gift that would last a lifetime. He told her that he would build her a music hall, uptown from their house in lower Manhattan on the land that he owned on 57th Street. Louise was thrilled with the idea. The very next day Andrew called his friend Walter Damrosch, who led the New York Oratorio Society, and told him about his new plans. Damrosch suggested the young architect William Burnet Tuthill, who was so excited by the offer that he started plans for the project immediately. To everyone’s delight, the finished building, Carnegie Hall, was named for his Louise. For the very first concert, Andrew had a royal box installed in the first tier.

“This gala performance took place on May 5, 1891, with Tchaikovsky conducting, by Andrew’s invitation.” The stranger stopped, and his face seemed to glow as he told the story. He sipped some more of his cocktail and continued.

“William Tuthill stood in the back of the hall, as excited as everyone else as it began to fill. Then his excitement turned to concern, for this was the very first time anyone had used Carnegie steel and concrete to erect such a large hall. Then his concern turned to anxiety and sweat. Would the structure that he had created be able to hold up? Fearfully, he watched the large crowd entering the hall. Tuthill left hurriedly and flagged down

a horse carriage and asked the driver to take him home, fast. There he checked and rechecked his calculations, relieving the doubts that he had. After reviewing all his data, he jumped to his feet, satisfied that Carnegie Hall could and would support a filled auditorium. He retrieved his hat and coat and rushed back to the hall, entering to the last chords of the music and the swelling applause as Tchaikovsky bowed to the audience and waved to the Carnegies in their box.”

The stranger took a deep breath and sipped the last of his martini. “Unfortunately,” he said, “Tuthill never went to another concert at Carnegie Hall.” With a deep sigh he stood up. “By the way, I do have a ticket for tonight’s concert; I’ll leave it here on the table.” He straightened his bow tie, bowed slightly to Ed, and left.

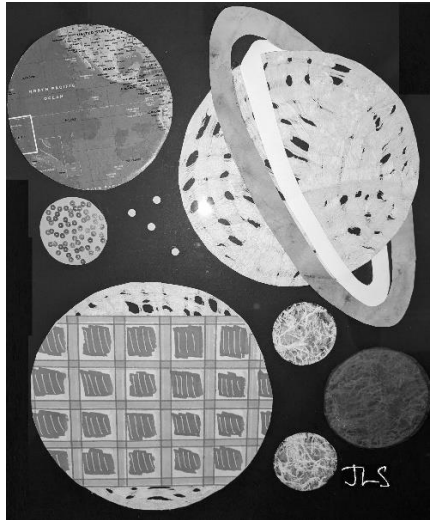
“How do you know all about this story?” Ed yelled after him. The stranger turned at the door, looked back and smiled.

George Rubin

POEM FROM JUPITER

Hovering over this giant planet I go
Another ten-hour day ends, four moons rise:
Europa, Ganymede, Callisto and Io
Along with 49 other smaller points of light
To illuminate Jupiter in its might
And we, moonlike in our satellite home
Above this gassy planet roam
Marduk, Zeus, Brihaspati, Thor
These were the ancient names for him
But there were more
Jove gave rise to jovial, Jupiter's said attribute
But what of happiness can we know here,
 what tribute?
Outside this satellite cage, this metal orb
What air, what gravity, what birdsong to absorb?

Elizabeth Larose



A MINOR MYSTERY

Edvard Grieg was appalled. He sat in his detached workshop, his *Komponisthytte*, the composer's hut, sightlessly staring over the magnificent water that was his inspiration. The land flattened here, creating the brackish Nordaas Lake, whose outlet canal led to the North Sea. There were none of the looming cliffs for which Norway is famous, and the wind swept unimpeded across the space. There was a pungent smell of salt thrown up by small lapping waves. In his *hytte*, Grieg grasped the noises, smells, and tastes of air and water to create music with the texture of the land that he loved. Here he worked away from the domestic bustle of his large house, but on his desk no work confronted him. The pile of lined paper which he'd filled with hand-written musical notes was gone. Edvard was in anguish.

It was a concerto for piano and orchestra on which he'd been laboring. The theme had come to him months ago, springing from the wind-lashed waves of the lake. Boom! Boom, boom, boom. Dah de dah, dah de dah. He'd written it down as fast as he could. He had no need of the piano next to his desk, he heard it in his head. The orchestration took longer, much longer, and he'd occasionally consulted with friends. What was the range of the flute? Was it reasonable to ask the cellos to finger this series of notes? Did they think that the tympani was too much? There was so much to know, so much detail. When exhaustion had overtaken him the previous evening, he'd finished the first draft except for the resounding conclusion. He heard it clearly, but it would have to

wait until morning. Even a genius had to sleep. He'd left the eighty-page score in a neat pile on his desk next to the last few sheets that would serve for the finale, carefully placing on it the note he always left. "If anyone should break in here, please leave the musical scores, since they have no value to anyone except Edvard Grieg." Now, only the blank sheets remained.

The maid! He realized that when he'd entered his workshop after breakfast, the door had been unlocked. That new maid. Judithe was it? Nina had hired her without his permission. There were limits to what a wife should do without consulting her husband. He whirled out of his *hytte* in a fury, but by the time he had climbed the hill to his house, the cool air of a Norwegian spring had calmed him, and he entered, remembering all of the things Nina did that allowed him to create his music undisturbed.

"Nina," he said, spotting her in the guest parlor instructing that same maid. "My manuscript is missing." He started to heat up again. "It was stolen from my desk! Not even you are allowed in there without my permission, but someone has stolen it." He looked accusingly at Judithe. "Perhaps she..."

"No, no, no, master," said the frightened girl. "Madam told me never to enter your *hytte*."

"Edvard," his wife said, "what use would a young girl have for a pile of paper?"

Grieg sputtered. "Pile of paper? Do you know what Liszt or Brahms would give for that 'pile of paper'? Even Tchaikovsky, he's young but..."

“Now, now,” Nina said. “Those men admire you, but they have their own work and their own style. Let’s go look. Maybe the wind...”

“The wind? The wind? Would I leave a window open flipping the drapery about?” Grieg was incensed. Nevertheless, he dutifully followed his wife as she marched to the hut.

Once inside, she was like a hound on the hunt. She surveyed the room carefully. No manuscript. “You said the door was unlocked?” Edvard nodded. “Edvard, you really do need Judithe’s help here. Look at all of this mud on the doorstep. Could you not clean your shoes?”

“I always clean my shoes,” Grieg protested. “Besides, it’s been fine spring weather, dry for the last three days.”

“Hmmm,” Nina pursed her lips. “I have an idea. Walk with me to the lake. There’s always mud there.” Gingerly, they walked down to the rocky shore. “Look there. See the footprints?” she said.

“Strange little things, like a barefoot child. But we’ve no children here,” Grieg said.

“My God, by the shore,” Nina pointed. It was sitting on a rock at the lake’s edge, the size of a six-year-old, with an enormous head, and ugly beyond anything Edvard had ever seen. Its feet were small, hairy, and bare and it had a thin, springy tail. On its lap and firmly grasped in a monstrous hand was a sheaf of paper. Even from where they were standing, Grieg could see that it

was his concerto. He started forward and the thing lifted the paper, holding it suspended over the lake water.



“No,” Grieg whispered, trying to win its confidence. “Please.” He and Nina froze.

“You! I know you.” A shrill voice came from behind them. “Don’t you dare hurt that! You’ve already gotten me in trouble. You’re just jealous of the master because you can’t do anything but steal people’s goats. You give me that and I’ll give you some candy.” Judithe strode by them, her arm outstretched, and something held in her fingers. The thing cringed as she drew close, then with a lightning move grabbed the candy, handed Judithe the manuscript, and tore away over the rocks.

The girl handed the paper to Grieg who stared at her with wonder.

“What was that...thing?” he asked.

“You didn’t know?” the girl said. “You named your house after him: *Troldhaugen*.”

“Troll Hill,” Nina whispered. “I never thought they really...”

“Judithe, thank you,” Grieg said. “I’m so glad Nina picked you. Do you think he might do it again?”

“He might,” she said. “He has no music and he’s very jealous of you.”

“Suppose I...” He whispered something in her ear, then made the same suggestion to Nina. Both women nodded and said, “That might do the trick.”

And it did, because after he finished his concerto, he started work on a less famous piece, *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen*. And the troll, who couldn’t read, thought it was for him and never disturbed the master’s work again.

* * *

Please note that aside from the obvious fantasy, the above is highly inaccurate. The first of many revisions of Grieg’s Piano Concerto in A-minor, Op. 16 was written and first performed in 1868 in Denmark. Troldhaugen, Grieg’s home in Bergen, Norway was completed in 1885. Consider this story as mostly poetic license. As far as I know, Judithe never existed. As for the troll, well...it is called Troldhaugen.

Bob Edelson

'RAP ME UP SOME OF THAT TO GO

So many times, I've tried to hear
what rappers have to say.
Their words shoot at my straining ears
with sounds that ricochet.

That "music" has a heavy beat
which makes my molars grind.
My efforts end up in defeat.
I'm puzzled and maligned.

Rap's chatter is accompanied
by wild prancings, to and fro
In pants that sag below the knees
with a mic shoved up the nose.

With gestures that are like a punch,
the ritual goes on.
Our kids enjoy it (What a bunch!).
They scream and yell and fawn!

I could just ignore that noise
and defer to Kern or Gershwin.
I love the lyrics of those boys -
so clear, just like a sermon!

But, rap's a favorite of our kids,
no matter if WE 'get it.'
It drives us old guys into fits -
its sounds make us regret it.

I've really tried to get the gist
of its rapid-firing rhetoric
But I confess I've sadly missed
abilities to weather it.

Hey, I've been wrong! The sound's the thing,
'tho I can't discern a word.
I'd much prefer someone who sings
With lyrics clearly heard.

So, let's put rap where it belongs –
with many of our youth.
(But I worry that they're going wrong
with brash words so uncouth.)

The next time that I'm startled
by the frenzy of some rap,
I'll turn it off and close my eyes
and simply take a nap.

Harry Forrest

PEOPLE WHO HAVE STOOD OUT IN OUR LIVES

It may have been a relative, a friend, a boss, an employee, someone whose special warmth or charm we experienced, or just a person who stood out in our life because they were unique, wonderful, or terrible. Our own Medford Leas *Writers Roundtable* members reflected on such people and wrote about them.

For example, **Uncle Bill** was a man of all trades and capabilities. He had been a vaudeville performer with his brothers, where he sang and danced while dressed in drag. “My first real recollection of Uncle Bill is when he came to our house to hang wallpaper ... By that time he was a projectionist in a movie theater. I think he did that for many years. I know he got tickets for me and my friends when the Beatles movie, *A Hard Day’s Night*, came out in 1964 ... He seemed to love South Street and often went to the Theater of the Living Arts Cinema near 5th and South, going to see *The King of Hearts*, an independent movie starring Alan Bates, several times. Once I was on the South Street bus on my way home and ran into him just riding around for entertainment.” (*Doris Kabley*)

“My older brother **Moe** was my beloved character. When he was in his senior year of high school, he was drafted into the Army ... assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. Wounded on D-Day, he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (then called ‘combat stress reaction’) as well as physical wounds. He was considered 100% disabled by the military, and he received all of his

subsequent treatment in Veterans Administration clinics and hospitals. Eventually he was able to work as a U.S. mailman in the middle of Manhattan. One day he had to deliver a letter, that needed a signature, to the vice president of finance at American Telephone and Telegraph Company. He used this opportunity to ask questions about investing, which was a new interest for him. He held that company's stock for fifty years, while successful investing became his life's work. His marriage was arranged by our father and *it* lasted sixty years. I was with him when he died in old age at the Tucson VA hospice.”
(*Al Migdal*)

Another singular person for a Writers Roundtable member was across the Atlantic Ocean in England. “Dear **Bobby Pete** ... Your clothes were my first impression. You wore an old Harris tweed jacket, most likely a hand-me-down. You wore it every single day. It was held together by a length of rope and served you in winter and summer alike.... It was your English which most fascinated me. It was a combination of old English, a lack of education and a total dearth of knowing any spot on earth other than the little village of Colmworth in Bedfordshire. Sir Roger Osborn was our landlord and your ultimate boss ... Tending cows, shearing sheep, harvesting brussels sprouts – these were the jobs that you did. And there was kindness ... You saw and felt that you were loved.” (*Deedy Roberts*)

Colleagues of another writer, who in the past were all part of a NASA workshop, were extremely special people. Many were scientists of renown, with memorable characteristics and behavior. **Dr. Bruce Murray** of

Caltech was one of those people. In our writer's words, "I found Dr. Murray in his surprisingly small office. Like most academic offices, it was lined with books and clothed with papers. With his square jaw and intellectual credentials, he was an imposing person. We chatted for a moment or two and then he got to the point. He had some ideas ... and he wanted me to advocate them at the workshop meetings. This was a bit high-handed, I thought. ... I stopped him, partly with pique, but also because, like Medford Leas ... I believed in a PIW system. 'Dr. Murray,' I said, 'could you give me your thoughts in writing? I want to be sure I understand.' He gave me the strangest look, but agreed ... That was the last time I ever directed Bruce Murray to write up or indeed do anything. A week later it was announced that the Director of Caltech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory was retiring, and Dr. Murray would replace him. That made him my boss's boss's boss ..." (*Bob Edelson*)

For another of our writers, her college teacher provided inspiration. "... A professor of English ... whose great ... enthusiasm for the written word was expressed every day with his exclamations of joy followed by the raising of his bushy black eyebrows. Whether interpreting a Shakespearean sonnet or the lyrics to a Beatles song, his infectious humor and delight taught more than words to his students. I learned to listen to the vocabulary of other authors and find any nuances and hidden meaning ... in their prose and poetry. What a gift he brought to me. I will always be grateful to **Professor Nimmer** for this joy of literature and words." (*Cynthia Page*)

A member of the group who retired from working not too long ago wrote about her secretary, who was much more to her than an employee. “The person most important to my life is my friend, secretary, mother-substitute, role-model and soul-sister, **Andy**. She came to work for me as my secretary 28 long years ago. When I hired her, I said we needed to remain professional. Well, in those 28 years she has supported me [personally as well as professionally]. She understood and respected my mission of healing ... We share values. We live in truth and love. She is patient, warm and smart. There is a bond of mutual trust. There is not much in my home that Andy has not been a partner in choosing, like my counters. She takes care of my plants. She opens jars; you name it. She makes my life work. I would not want to be in this world without her ... She is my own personal angel.” (*Paula Susan*)

A writer who was originally from a small town had a close relationship with her grandmother as a child, but feels she never knew enough about **Granny**. “When we were little, she was our constant companion, mine especially because I was not yet in school. She read to us by the hour; taught us card games, phrases in German, and Bible stories; made and mended toys; supervised our chores; watched us during parents’ nights out; and listened to all our stories about high school and college. She never said the cliched phrase, “When I was your age.” How I wish she had. While this writer inherited a trunk of family heirlooms, I speculate about what I would dearly love to know about my grandmother’s things. Why did she save them, particularly through

many moves and hardships? Whose were they originally? When did they stop using warming pans?” (*Kathy Riley*)

Another writer wrote about a friend **Babs** from Texas who would stand out in any setting. “An extrovert, her voice is loud, filled with salty language and Texas expressions that go far beyond *y’all* ... She announces that she is going to use the bathroom during Zoom calls and that we should talk among ourselves. (I remember another Texas woman in a high-powered job who would announce during meetings that she was going out to *tinkle*.) Babs has unrestrained, uncut, wavy wild gray hair, which she brushes vigorously while she is talking to friends, just like her mother did. When long strands fall from her scalp during all this brushing, she does something that I find very quirky. She opens a window and places the strand on the outdoor windowsill, twirling it around whatever strands she has already laid there. Her goal is to provide nest-building material for the local birds in mild Texas weather.” (*Joyce Linda Sichel*)

We all hope that you have found our special people interesting and that you have enjoyed reading about them. You could let us know who caught your attention the most in our collection, and you may feel inspired to write about someone who stood out in your life.

Medford Leas Writers Roundtable

Note: If you enjoy writing you are welcome to participate in our Writers Roundtable meetings on the first Monday each month in the Linden Room from 10 am until 11:30. Call Joyce Sichel with questions.

EPIDEMICS

The day announced another disease.
Dis-eased we're still by the previous one.
We don the masks we'd otherwise shun.
But we know how to deal with these.

The monkey pox, the latest spawn,
Reminds me of *The Monkey's Paw*.
Silence, no wishing, it has a claw.
My smallpox vaccine, active or gone?

Today a worry came in a call,
To Covid, at table, I've been exposed.
Not yet have I been diagnosed.
No mask for meals but why in the hall?

Our plans a virus ridicules,
With its evolving molecules.

Bob Edelson

LET'S VISIT LITTLE THINGS

Come with me on a small journey – to visit little things. If, like me, you were a child delighted with little objects, with life in miniature, then this journey is for you. It starts when we go to a very high-end toy store on New York City's Fifth Avenue – F.A.O. Schwartz. We see many dollhouses made by skilled craftspeople. Many of us have had dollhouses before - whether made by a relative, borrowed from a sister, or bought. Do hand-me-downs, corrugated cartons, or mass-produced plastic ring any bells? They probably were fun for playing house, however modest. But when we see one of this toy store's beautifully small homes with exquisitely detailed furniture and accessories, we will probably all gasp. I wanted that dollhouse more than I had ever wanted anything. You might imagine that same feeling and then being told that it was simply too expensive.

With a few tears, the journey continues with a visit to a wonderful old museum, The Museum of the City of New York, a dusty treasure trove on upper Fifth Avenue across from Central Park. There are many dollhouses there, some rather similar to my first love, but dustier and older. They had been selected for exhibit because they reflected various historical periods in house style and furniture, especially Victorian and Edwardian. Through the glass cases they are housed in, we admire little breakfronts for tiny glass objects and highboys for clothing. We can stop in front of each house to appreciate wallpapers, draperies, fireplaces, hanging chandeliers, secretary-style desks, children's nurseries, and even bathrooms with old fashioned fixtures. Most of the beds are

four-poster style and have fabric bedding, although they are a little dusty and graying. There are dainty chairs around dining room tables, ornately backed sofas, rocking chairs, and oilcloth covering the worktables in the kitchen. Some of the houses are even fitted out with carpentry touches like French doors, windowsills, porches, shutters, and door knockers. It is hard to tear ourselves away, but we can return another day.

We travel now to the antique shops of the Berkshires, not far from our sons' YMCA Camp Sloane in Kent, Connecticut. We find numerous little houses, and these are for sale – although the prices are again steep. We can consider whether to delight our mature selves or a young family member with a purchase. Less expensive are the kits with pre-cut wood pieces to glue together and shingle a dollhouse ourselves. I made one from a kit in the past, and donated this boxy Craftsman style house to the local Girl Scout troop.

Now we're going to fly to Texas before we wind up our journey. Welcome to my psychology office, not far from the huge Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. We are all invited into my children's therapy room to play with a bulky Scandinavian dollhouse holding blocky blonde wood furniture and pipe-cleaner people in simple clothing. When we get tired of all my old-fashioned toys there, we drive to North Dallas to visit a marketplace of shops called *Olla Podrida* (Spanish for a cooking pot). We are treated on the top level to a shop full of dollhouse furniture. These artful pieces are so beguiling, we may want to buy a few to take home (even if we have no dollhouse to put them in). There are porch swings, vintage

kitchen appliances, and almost anything our imaginations conjure up.

We end our journey close to home in Beach Haven on the ocean. There we pay a call on the volunteer-staffed, community-owned Long Beach Island Museum. We find two substantial historic dollhouses (one fully furnished) that almost certainly came from a local attic. We fellow journeyers who have come this far certainly appreciate the preservation of these little houses. I hope you have had a good trip and perhaps some nostalgia for the past or even plans for the future.

Joyce Linda Sichel



R.I.P.

Bereft of hope, he lowers his head
and buries his face in the blanket
that has been spread for him,
to receive his ultimate treatment.

He seeks solace in the darkness
but finds only resignation.
He no longer yearns for the life
that is being taken from him.

A decade and a half ago he appeared
out of nowhere in the night,
sat on our stoop and begged for food and shelter,
promising in return unconditional love.

He became the child of our family,
nuzzling his way into our hearts.
He remained our child even as
age and infirmity asserted their claim against him.

Painfully aware that his time has come,
he begs for a merciful end.
He has kept his promise to us,
and we will honor his last wish.

Herb Heineman

SANTA'S LITTLE HELPERS

November 30, 2021, did not dawn bright and sunny for Medford Leas' Decorating Day. A witty WHYH commentator remarked, "No need to search for shade. Mother Nature has taken care of that with clouds all day." In Lumberton, however, Christmas Tree Elf (CTE) tried to remain hopeful. At least there was no rain in the forecast. The car was packed with assorted origami ornaments and a poster, neither of which did well in a downpour. She checked her emergency supplies for decorating: scissors, two-sided tape, wire, and pliers. Not standard origami equipment but necessary when creating an installation, and she had three trees on her list. Then she donned her festive red sweater, and reheated coffee in hand, she headed for the car. She then remembered the step stool, so it was back indoors, upstairs to get it, and out the door again. She congratulated herself for having remembered the stool and anticipated being early for her rendezvous with the elves on the other campus.

Unbeknownst to her, the home phone was frantically ringing. The elves had assembled at 9 a.m. but CTE had confused the time with Lumberton decorating and was actually late already. Not a good start.

Arriving behind the Arts and Social Wing, she unloaded the ornaments, stool, and supplies, placing them next to the elevator. She had expected an elf with a red wagon to meet her, but no one was in sight. Still thinking she was early, CTE parked her car, returned to the

elevator, and rose to the second floor with the box of ornaments.

Exiting the elevator, she turned right and saw a crowd of elves but not the two she had expected. They were gathered around a substantial artificial tree, clutching strands of lights. So the tree would need to have lights put on first, then, and it wasn't in the same spot as last year. And there was no red wagon to carry the rest of the gear up from below.

Soon enough, the other elves told CTE about her timing mistake, but since the tree wasn't yet ready, they didn't need the ornaments right away. Now they could get to work. While CTE made two more trips in the elevator, the other elves began putting the lights on the tree, having checked them first to see that they actually lit. The step stool came in very handy.

Just as the elves began to unload paper cranes from several large boxes, Mrs. Claus in her red apron arrived and announced, "That tree is not in the right place!" She took charge and found a maintenance person and the horticulturalist, who together heaved the tree across the hall and into position between the Garden Room's doors and plugged in the lights. After a flurry of adjustments, Mrs. Claus pronounced it correct and thanked the helpers. CTE finally began to breathe normally; the decorating could begin.

This year's elves had no experience decorating with origami cranes, but they had excellent ideas. The tallest elf mounted the step stool and attached strands of cranes to the top branches. Others opened the wings of

individual cranes and began hanging them between the strands, rejoicing that the branches of an artificial tree can bend to accommodate ornaments. After one elf protested that every single bird, no matter how bedraggled, should be hung, many ended up in back or deep inside the branches. Residents passed through, offering compliments and hanging a crane or two. Mrs. Claus returned to applaud the efforts and hand out 50th Anniversary cookies to the busy elves. Other decorating elves scurried by, hanging wreaths in the brightly lit, busy hall.

CTE relaxed and allowed others to take charge. She remembered the 2020 crane tree in that same hall, cold and dim, where three masked elves had worked by themselves. No residents passed because the Garden Room and Theater were closed. It was the route from the kitchen to Assisted Living, however, and Dining Service staff occasionally passed by and offered encouragement. A tall staff member obligingly mounted the top ornament for the short elves. Subsequently, many residents would go to that back hall to look at the tree, and they were very complimentary, but that first day, it was a bit lonely in that long hall.

What a difference a year had made. Things were still uncertain, but on this day, residents were allowed to be together and share traditions. There would be more setbacks, bad news, and disappointments in 2022, but this was a *carpe diem* moment. She prepared to make the most of it as she and her old and new friends put the finishing touches on their peace crane holiday tree.

Kathy Riley



WRITING FOR LEAS LIT

Residents of both campuses are encouraged to submit original manuscripts for publication in Leas Lit Literary Journal, which is published in June and December.

Twice a year, a flyer soliciting submissions is distributed to all residents and staff department heads. It contains instructions for submitting work, a deadline, and contact information for questions. Manuscripts received after the deadline will be considered for the next issue.

Authors' names are removed on receipt of the manuscripts so that the editors do not know whose work they are reviewing. This system ensures that personal feelings about individual authors do not influence the evaluation of their work.

There is no limit to the number of pieces an author may submit. However, the same author may have no more than two pieces – one prose and one poetry – in each issue. Additional works by that author that are judged acceptable will be held over for the next issue.

The following policies apply to submissions. The piece should be in English, original and not have been published previously. Book reviews will not be accepted. Each piece should be no longer than 1600 words.

If you have a story to tell – true or fictional – or feelings to share, let us hear from you.

