

LEAS LIT

The Medford Leas Literary Journal



NUMBER 46

DECEMBER 2023

PUBLISHED CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1998

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Published by the
Medford Leas Residents Association
Medford Leas, Route 70
Medford, New Jersey 08055
609-654-3000

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Publication of Leas Lit is made possible by support
from the Medford Leas Residents Association
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MY MOTHER'S SMILE

My mother's face fell naturally into a smile. She had high cheek bones, buck teeth, and dark slanting eyes. She was her father's favorite; he kept her from the heaviest work in the fields. She loved school and she sailed through the three grades of the one-room schoolhouse in the village.



**After the wedding reception.
Everyone is smiling along with Carlo and his mother.**

She stayed on for two extra years, helping the younger students while the teacher gave her extra assignments. In old age, she remembered words, fragments of the saga of Orlando, which must have been the Italian version of the tale of Roland.

I have a letter my mother wrote to her sister in Sicily about ten years before she died. In it, her third-grade prose, strewn with errors, tugs at my heart.

My mother insisted that her boys go to school, at a time when some of my friends quit school and went to work at sixteen. That's why she worked, to keep her sons in school, perhaps to go on to college. And she wanted her sons to marry educated girls. She won two of her bets. My middle brother became a jazz musician, but Steve and I did go to college and I married an educated girl.

My mother was a machine operator who worked in a factory. The machine, of course, was a sewing machine. She worked only in silk, one dress at a time. High end stuff. When I was twelve, and my brother Steve was in the Pacific, and my brother Frank was at a Boy Scout camp, my mother gave me, and herself, a treat: lunch in center city Philadelphia.

We ate at Lit Brothers, the modest department store at Eighth and Market Streets. Lits was the store we normally patronized. Afterwards we walked to John Wanamaker's, the high-end store at Thirteenth and Market. We found our way to the exclusive Tribout Shop on the third floor, where expensive women's clothes were displayed and sold. We found the racks that held the dresses made by the manufacturer for whom my mother worked.

A machine operator of my mother's skill could complete about one dress per day, depending upon the complexity of the dress. Every operator faintly initialed the labels of the dresses she completed. We couldn't find any that my mother had initialed, but my mother pulled a

dress from the rack: \$79.99. Very big bucks in 1944, but there was plenty of money around during the war years. To make that dress, a day's work, my mother had been paid \$13.50.

My mother had wanted her sons to marry educated girls, girls worthy of themselves. She was thrilled when I married Margie, a girl whose family was so tall! so American! Margie was far better educated than I, but my mother was ignorant of distinctions. To her, college was college, and so she smiled.

Carlo Perrone

BABY BIRDS RESCUED

During the spring season this year, a pair of song sparrows decided to build a nest inside a holly wreath with pinecones which had been hung outside Peggy Siegel's door in Courtyard 9. The female sparrow did most of the work bringing additional leaves and twigs to comfortably fill the wreath. Peggy monitored the nest building process, and one day noticed there were two eggs in it. The sparrow was spending a considerable amount of time in the nest.

Peggy checked on the situation often, and one day to her delight she was able to confirm that there were two baby sparrows in the nest. A few days later we found that one of the baby birds had fallen from the nest and was lying on the concrete. Peggy picked it up and



replaced it in the nest. She was worried that handling the bird might cause its mother to reject it. However, for several days thereafter she observed that there were still two baby birds moving about in the nest and were being fed by their parents.

Unfortunately, there were two consecutive days that were especially cold and windy, followed by some rain. It soon became evident to Peggy that the adult birds had abandoned their babies, as there was no sighting of them for several days.

I live in an apartment across from Peggy in Courtyard 9. The weekend before the bad weather occurred, my daughter Donna and grandchildren Claire and



Archer visited me. When I took them over to see the baby birds moving around, they were very excited but watched quietly.

Peggy doesn't drive, and on June 4th she asked if I could help her take the baby birds to the Woodford Cedar Run wildlife refuge. I called my daughter who lives in Medford not far from the refuge. She said she would be glad to come with Claire to get the birds and take them to the refuge. In the meantime, Peggy had packed the birds in a small box which we covered with a towel. We walked out to parking lot C and Donna and Claire met us there. We handed over the bird box to Claire and Donna drove to the refuge with Claire holding the precious cargo in her lap.

The refuge agreed to care for and hopefully release the birds to their natural habitat after 90 days. It apparently takes about that long to teach baby birds how to feed themselves and survive on their own. We were instructed not to contact the refuge for status updates during this 90-day period. Their personnel are busy caring for many baby birds and animals and prefer not to be distracted answering phone calls and emails until the babies are released to their habitat. After 90 days, we received great news from the refuge. The baby birds had been successfully released.

Arnold Page

NO TIME

Anticipating pain, I set my clock radio for 5:30 am. The next day I had to attend an 8:00 am meeting with the CEO. She was a workaholic and we wondered if she went home at all. We knew two more things about her: she'd just divorced her fifth wife, and she was prompt. I don't suppose she had much to go home to.

So, I set the clock. I'd shower, dress, eat, take my half-hour commute, do some last-minute prep at my desk: yep, 5:30 am. Of course, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned for anxious hours, at first disturbing, then riling my wife, Jane. This did not help my sleep situation. Sometime in the night, I drowsed off.

I woke with light penetrating my eyelids and for a moment I luxuriated in the rare feeling of being rested. Then my eyes snapped open. The light I sensed wasn't dawn, it was full daylight. "Oh no!" I yelled, inadvertently waking Jane. She wasn't angry; she looked rested too, without the harried look that her work, and I, usually gave her.

"Mmmm," she smiled, then frowned. "What time is it?" she said.

"I don't know, but it's not 5:30." I looked at the clock radio. It was dark, a brick, punching its buttons did nothing. I groaned. "I've overslept, I'm toast." I picked up my watch: dead. My cell, still attached to its charger: dead. "We must have lost power," I said and slapped on shaving cream, trying to see myself in the bathroom's semi-darkness. No shower or breakfast this morning. I'd

be lucky if I still had a job. Jane too had a job and she started yanking out clothing.

Flustered, frantic, we headed for our cars. The garage door wouldn't open, no power. I got out of my car and, grunting, released the catch and pulled it up. Damn thing weighed a ton. As I started back to my car, I heard Jane exclaiming in hers. She threw open the door and in as close to cursing as she ever came said, "The effing thing won't start. Can you drop me off?"

I'd be later still, but we were partners in disaster, "Hop in," I said and threw myself in the driver's seat. The car was as dead as the clock radio. Reflexively, I looked at my watch, it was still dead. Wait a minute. A power outage wouldn't affect my watch. What was going on? But I had no time to think about it, just a damned inconvenient coincidence. I turned to Jane. "Are you up for the Harley?" She grimaced but nodded yes. We hopped on my classic Harley-Davidson, and it started right up. "Thank God!" I shouted over the characteristic rumble of the motorcycle, and we hurtled into the street. We were at Jane's work in five minutes. There was hardly a car on the road, and they all seemed to be old. She dismounted. "I'll walk home, Hon. Good luck!" I waved thanks and roared off.

My half-hour commute took fifteen minutes in the weirdly light traffic. I parked and ran to the door. Oddly, it was propped open, and the security guard checked my badge. "What's up, Charley?" I asked.

"Badge reader's down, so the door don't work. Hell, nothing's working, including the elevator. No

power, and the emergency generator don't work either. The building engineer is going nuts."

"But the CEO's conference room is on the twentieth floor!" I blurted.

Charley grinned. "You don't think she'd climb stairs in her heels, do you? She's in the corporate theater, down the hall. But don't worry, you aren't late."

I gave him a puzzled look as I ran to the theater. The doors were propped open here too, which let in some light that had strayed from the windows across the corridor. Other than that, the room was lit only by the dim, battery-powered emergency lights. "Looks like I've got one conscientious employee, at least," said a voice from the darkness. As my eyes adjusted, I saw a single figure, a woman in a dark suit incongruously sitting on the edge of the stage swinging her dangling legs like a five-year-old. On her feet were clunky sneakers, a contrast to her usual footwear. That caught me off stride. She hopped down and approached me, her hand out. "How'd you get here?" she asked.

"On my Harley."

She nodded. "Old one?" I nodded. "I got here on my bike. My alarm clock woke me; it's an old windup one. You know what time it is?" she said with a mock frown. She showed me her Patek Philippe watch. The second hand moved sedately around the face of the \$40,000 Swiss mechanical. "Figured it out yet?" I shook my head. "Me neither, but our engineers have. They don't understand it. They don't really believe it, but they say that every electronic clock in the world has failed."

“And every electronic thing needs a clock,” I finished. “But the whole world? How do you know, and why?”

“Ham radio, the ancient vacuum tube analog machines operating off batteries...for awhile at least. Why? We’d consult the physicists if we had a phone. Sit down, the others, or most of ’em anyway, will trickle in. We’ve lost a hundred years of technology. I think this is permanent and we and everyone else better figure out what to do.”

We and everyone else did, eventually. After all, people in the 1920s did pretty well without electronics. Don’t let me diminish the effort and displacement though. A lot of people died in the transition. But some things improved. The Amish with their horse-drawn equipment and those farmers who could resurrect fifty-year-old tractors did great. Third-world countries hardly noticed. A lot of white-collar jobs disappeared. Lots of changes, books have been written – on typewriters, of course.

And why did it happen? Well, theoretical physicists have lots of theories. Maybe some of those physical constants aren’t, and a little change in some obscure number... The experimental physicists would love to help, but they haven’t figured out how to do it without computers.

The other day, I found my old digital watch in a drawer. It was running. I started to yell to Jane, then I stopped, thinking about our quiet evening walks and our restored 1946 Ford, and I threw it back in the drawer.

Bob Edelson

GOT BODY INK?

In the old days,
anchors under Navy middies
signaled to their intimates
experience and toughness.



Not so long ago,
a small name, flower or heart
discreetly told their besties
they were very, very cool.

Today the ink is public art.
Job-holders jettisoned
cover-ups, sporting large
designs on available skin.

Gender matters not.
Elaborate and painful electric
scarifying is placed to be displayed
and admired by all.

So you are the canvas
for today's tattoos.
You may think they are beauties,
but will you still love them tomorrow?



Joyce Linda Sichel

THE GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD

While cleaning out my father's desk after his death, I came upon four yellowed, typed pages entitled The Great Molasses Flood. Never having heard of this event, I was intrigued and wanted to learn more. The smudgy pages he'd saved revealed an account of a unique disaster that took place in Boston's old North End in 1919.

What was molasses used for in the nineteen hundreds? you ask. Since colonial times, ships loaded with wooden barrels of molasses had sailed from the Caribbean to Boston. Molasses is the thick, dark residue left in vats where sugar cane has been boiled to produce white sugar. For those who couldn't afford it, molasses was a cheaper substitute. Local distillers used molasses to produce alcohol and, during WWI, explosives.

The Purity Distilling Company had built a tank of stainless-steel plates 58 feet tall and 98 feet in diameter 200 feet from Boston's inner harbor. The company had three shifts working to produce as much ethanol as possible before Prohibition took effect. On January 12, 1919, tankers from Puerto Rico had pumped the tank nearly to its brim with 3,320,000 gallons of molasses weighing 14,000 tons.

For years people in the area had noticed molasses leaking from the seams of the tank. Children collected this free sweetener in cups. The company chose to address this problem by caulking the riveted seams, then painting the sides brown so the leaks were less visible. As it turned out, the tank had been built with substandard steel walls and was said to groan when being filled.

Shortly after noon on January 15, an unusually balmy 45-degree day, a loud grinding noise was heard by firemen, stable hands, truck drivers, and residents of the area. Nearby buildings began to shake. Suddenly the sides of the giant tank gave way, and a flood of molasses 25 feet high began to spread. In its wake, two city blocks of homes, businesses, stables, and vehicles were destroyed.



First responders arrive at the scene

The local firehouse was shifted off its foundation, trapping four men inside. Steel plates and rivets flew through the air. An upright supporting the elevated train tracks was cut in half, but the brakeman on an approaching train was able to stop it before it plunged off into the street below. The city paving department office and stable were swept away, killing five men and a number of horses. In the streets workmen and horses were struggling in thigh-high sticky brown ooze. One man running ahead of the flow was picked up and deposited in the harbor. He was later rescued by a boat. An ambulance brought Red Cross nurses in oxford gray uniforms. They

plunged right in to help rescue the wounded. Later when firemen dragged the exhausted women out, they looked like creatures from the black lagoon.

Imagine people trapped in their homes, unable to open their doors. Basement apartments were filling, ceilings were collapsing, and once outside, walking was difficult. People drowned or were hit by debris carried by molasses moving at 35 miles per hour. The *Boston Post* printed a list of the known dead, the unidentified dead, and the injured. It was nearly a week before all 21 of the victims of the flood were recovered from the ooze. Dozens of horses were killed, not to mention dogs and cats. Cockroaches prospered.

Hundreds of bystanders tracked molasses all over downtown Boston, onto buses, trains, and trams. The next day it was said that passengers would stick to the seat of any public transport they boarded. Hoses were used to try and wash away the sticky syrup with scant success. Firemen discovered that salt water was much more effective and so enlisted the help of fireboats and pumps. Unfortunately Boston Fireboat Number 31 sank at its dock with loss of life. The police brought in huge hydrologic siphons to suck molasses out of flooded cellars. It was months before signs of the flood were removed. Three hundred volunteers scraped and scrubbed, but decades later the sweet smell of molasses lingered.

The court case that followed the disaster, a class action suit, took six years to resolve. The Purity Distilling Company claimed that the collapse of their tank was the result of an explosion set off by anarchists. To prove this point the company built and exploded three tanks. But

when it was found that the steel plates of their tank were thinner than those specified in plans filed with the Boston Building Commission, the defense collapsed. In 1925 an out-of-court settlement of over a million dollars was awarded in 119 separate damage suits. The lawsuit set the stage for increased government regulating of corporations, building codes, and inspections.

The disaster is remembered today by a small plaque in the North End's Puopolo Park. It wasn't until 2003 that a book about the flood, *The Dark Tide*, by Stephen Puleo, was published. Then in 2019, its hundredth anniversary, Scholastic Books released Laura Tarshise's *I Survived the Great Molasses Flood* as part of her *I Survived Disaster* series. Now students will learn, as I did, about this event, unique in the history of Boston and perhaps the world.

Holly Hoffman

THE WONDERFUL ZERO

After retiring from Aerospace, I was an adjunct, teaching mathematics at Bergen Community College. Among the courses I taught was a required one in mathematical concepts. Here are some reflections you might find interesting.

The Roman system for representing numbers was developed around 500 B. C. The Roman conquerors spread their numeral system throughout Europe, where it remained the common number system for centuries.

In the Roman numeral system, numerals are represented by various letters, so, in the Arabic system we use, $I = 1$, $V = 5$, $X = 10$, $L = 50$, $C = 100$, $D = 500$, $M = 1000$. The Roman numerals can be added together to represent all the other numbers. For example, the number 72 would be represented as LXXII ($L + X + X + I + I$, or $50 + 10 + 10 + 1 + 1$ in our numbers). For efficiency of representation, a smaller number placed in front of a larger meant subtraction, so that 9 could be VIII or IX. Roman numerals allow addition and subtraction but not multiplication, division, or fractions. Since M was the largest number they offered, it was very awkward to represent much larger numbers such as a million. The Romans had words for one quarter, one half and other fractions but could not calculate with them. Today residuals of this system are still used such as a half-pound of butter. The Romans had no mathematical way to represent the concept of nothing, or zero, nor did they have negative numbers. This severely inhibited their mathematical abilities.

Independently, the Mayans and the Chinese developed number systems with a concept similar to the zero used today. But the modern zero is thought to have been developed in India and then used by the Arabs. In the 12th century, Italian mathematician Fibonacci introduced the zero to Europe and by the 14th century the Arabic system had completely replaced Roman numbers in calculation, leaving the latter as decorative information in art, architecture, and printing. No matter a people's language or culture, all modern countries use the Arabic system based on the zero. Modern science, engineering and monetary systems would not be possible without it, and its use could be thought of as one of the most important innovations since the wheel.

What makes the zero so important? One use is as a place marker to make representation of large and small numbers simple. For example, starting with an integer such as 12, we can make it larger by adding zeros behind it such as 120 and 12000, each zero representing increasing the quantity by a factor of ten. We can also make a number smaller by adding zeros in front such as 0.12, 0.012, or 0.0012, decreasing each by a factor of ten. This makes it relatively easy to perform the basic operations of addition and subtraction and the derived operations of multiplication and division. When you are trying to balance your checkbook or work on your taxes, be thankful that you are working in our modern system based on the zero and not in Roman numbers.

Eric Hahn

OF MICE AND ME

I grew up in the country, in a house built in 1925 that had once been a summer camp. Of course there were mice – and rats, chipmunks, and squirrels – outside and in. Our neighbors farmed and kept cats in their barns. Endless kittens took care of their rodents, but my parents were transplanted city people, didn't have a barn, and weren't eager to have pets. They enjoyed watching the animals outside and never begrudged them seed from the bird feeders, but inside was another story. They had no qualms about using traps, so we had a stock of the spring version in several sizes.

Winter was prime trapping season; warmth and birdseed in the basement lured the critters in. When he detected droppings or the occasional gnawing, Dad baited the appropriate trap, set it in the right location, and checked it regularly. If the victim was still alive, he drowned it as quickly as possible and tossed the body back into the woods close to the house.

I was an apartment dweller for the first ten years after college, battling roaches at one address and ants in houseplants but not ever finding signs of mice. Then I moved into a house, with a yard, across the street from a good-sized park. And there were mice, though not many. My husband generally did the trapping, using sticky pads in the remote corners of the basement like the crawl space with the dirt floor. From time to time, we'd find a desiccated carcass. We used spring traps upstairs when necessary, and checked them daily. We caught a few mice a year that way.

One exception to the routine was the time when the babysitter was ironing in the basement, and our son Gavin stepped on a mouse with his bare feet as he was going down the cellar steps. His shout brought his sister, and kids and sitter had the presence of mind to cover the mouse with a container, slide cardboard underneath it, carry their trap outside and set the mouse free. I regret not having seen how that got done.

At 88 Woodside Drive, I am more vulnerable. It's far more rural, and the attached garage must be very tempting. Mice get as far as the kitchen, leave their calling card, and make the mistake of returning. A neighbor gave me two spring traps which did the job efficiently. I'd put on gloves and empty the trap into the trash can – until one day, the beginning of daylight saving time 2023.

The alarm woke me at 5:52 am (formerly known as 4:52). It was dark and cold and for the moment quiet. As I contemplated going back to sleep, I heard a noise from downstairs: metallic, something heavy shifting. Not the icemaker, the usual offender. It rattled once more, but then the heat came on. Could that noise be the death throes of my ancient HVAC? Many neighbors had had theirs replaced, and I lived in fear that mine would be next. I decided to get up and investigate.

Walking into the kitchen, I remembered setting the mouse trap the night before and putting it on the counter. There were droppings on the counter Friday morning. I had set the trusty trap, but the mouse had somehow managed to steal the cheese without springing it, so I had tried again.

Flicking the light on, I peered around the fridge. No mousetrap – though there were streaks of peanut butter and mouse droppings on the counter. I looked right, then under the counter, and saw nothing. My eyes moved left toward the gas stove.

There he was, crouched by the left rear burner, under the iron grates that cover the burners. That was the sound of heavy metal I had heard; the mouse had rattled those grates as he tunneled under them. And he was still very much alive, with just one front paw in the old-trap that he had dragged with him to his hiding place.



I knew what to do – gloves, water bucket, trash can. This mouse was wounded and wouldn't survive in the wild. And he was a serial offender. However, I hesitated. I had grown up loving animal stories. Mice were generally sympathetic characters. Disney had immortalized Cinderella's helpers, Beatrix Potter told of the diligent Tailor of Gloucester, and Arthur Rackham had field mice caroling on Christmas Eve in *The Wind in the Willows*. My victim was bright-eyed and cute; perhaps he could have had a career in film.

Reason prevailed. I accomplished the drowning and disposing tasks of the grown-up. And I invoked the words of Robert Burns to explain the situation. What is often seen as lofty wisdom about the human condition was literally true in my experience:

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Clearly Mousie's best laid plan included safely enjoying peanut butter, and mine was to rid my kitchen of a pest without having to actually look him in the eye. Mouse versus human, the latter seems to triumph, but my plans had also gone agley. Maybe I should get a cat.

Kathy Riley

WRITERS WRITE ABOUT MUSIC

Members of the Writers Roundtable often write on the same topic, though not necessarily at the same time. Frequently they are inspired by each other's pieces. Such is the case with the following excerpts. Several spontaneous reflections on music led to responses from others who wanted to be part of the conversation.

Taking my seat in Verizon Hall for a classical music concert is a thrill for me. The space is beautiful, and I can feel the whole audience waiting. I love the drama of musicians tuning up. The Hall's acoustics are magnificent. The concert master comes in and gets applause, and then the conductor comes in for another round of applause.... Then comes the wonderful music, much of which I am familiar with. I don't read sheet music and have not played an instrument, but a concert is fulfilling to me, especially when the orchestra playing is as wonderful as ours. (*Al Migdal*)



Some say the Ninth is the best piece of music ever written by Beethoven. Some say it is even the best composed by anyone. I got out my phone and looked at my various playlists. Beethoven it is! ... When the Ninth came on, specifically the fourth movement, the singer's voice stopped me. Even though he was singing in German, and I don't know the language, it was the power of his voice, the swelling of the orchestra, the soprano hitting those impossible high notes! ... It was phenomenal,

popular melodies bring the words back. While chamber music puts me to sleep, I enjoy pops performances if I've heard the featured tunes before. *(Kathy Riley)*

My musical ability and enjoyment of classical music and jazz is very limited. Even in childhood, like my writing colleague who just admitted to tone-deafness but a good memory, I usually remember the words to songs that I have heard more than once. I have a huge collection of lyrics for folk songs and classic country songs stored in my head, and I can usually pull them up when I want to. I tried to get proficient with the guitar so that I could accompany myself. I learned to play enough chords and read enough sheet music, but I could never really play in tune. *(Joyce Linda Sichel)*

participants in the Writers Roundtable

Editorial Postscript: Writers' "musical quotients" clearly vary, but each of them wrote that some aspect of music has brought them pleasure. We hope that you will relate to one or more of these reflections and may want to write about your own musical life, too.



LONDON CALLING

I sit in my living room streaming and listening on the radio to the “BBC Proms”: beautiful summer concerts that are coming live from the Royal Albert Hall in London. I find my thoughts wandering back. It was a warm and sunny day in May. Marge and I, with our good friend Marian, were having lunch in an Italian restaurant on Upper Woburn St. Like so many other things, modern London was changing. This restaurant used to be a Barclay bank and right outside the ubiquitous red phone box had been replaced with a modern Plexiglas stand. Welcome to the 21st century!

We were all enjoying the food and the conversation when suddenly I felt a hard marble rolling around in my mouth. When I coughed, out came the crown on my molar. I picked it up and exclaimed, “Now what!?” Marian, with her calm British demeanor said, “we need a telephone book to look for a dental laboratory.” Finding a book and the name and address of a nearby lab did not take long. One was listed near Pimlico station on the underground, just a few stops on the tube (subway) from our restaurant.

Marge and I told Marian, “We will meet you as planned at the Tate when we finish at the lab.” With this abrupt goodbye, we left. The dental lab was in an old pre-war building. When I knocked on the door, it was opened by a stooped, gray-haired woman wearing a lab apron. She removed her glasses and asked, “What can I do for you?” I took the broken crown from my pocket and showed it to her. She immediately opened the door

fully and said, “Do come in.” The room was small, filled with dozens of dental impressions and tools. Music came from a radio on one of the shelves. “As you can see, my crown has broken off.”

“O, bloody yes, do have a seat and I’ll tell you what needs to be done. Rachel, come in here,” she yelled. From the adjoining room a white-haired woman appeared, steadying herself with a walking stick. She smiled at us and said, “What’s the problem, Pam?”

“This American gentleman needs a crown repaired. We have to take an impression, so let’s get the material ready.” Rachel nodded and returned shortly with a rubber bowl filled with a syrupy mixture. Pam said, “Now open your mouth wide, deary.” She filled my mouth with the mixture where I sat as it hardened. When she had removed it, she said, “I want you back here on Friday, love, for the refitting.” We thanked the women and left to rejoin Marian at the Tate.

Friday morning turned out to be gray and dreary as I took the tube back to Pimlico. I knocked on the lab door and Pam opened it. “Come on in and take a seat.” My new crown sat in a plastic container, and Pam, with a deft hand and dental cement, affixed it to my molar. She called out, “Rachel come in here and take a look.” They both peered into my open mouth. “You think this Yank will survive?” Pam asked with a smile.

As they were cleaning up, I remarked, “I was an airman stationed here during the war.” “Well, well,” Pam said. “My sister and I as teenagers also stayed and survived here during the blitz. Rachel, let’s have a cup of

tea.” The three of us sat for over an hour and reminisced about our lives during those war years.

It was Pam who said finally, “I better give you the good news and the bad news. The good news is that the crown and cap look like a good fit and will last a long time. The bad news is, our fee is 95 pounds. I stood up and looked at these women. “It was worth the cost. Being able to share our past together was something that you cannot put a price on.” With a hug for each, we said goodbye.

So I sit here now, listening to the music and thinking about how our lives crossed in the past. All this over a broken tooth.

George Rubin

WORLDS OVERLAPPING

The mantis shrimp with mighty claw,
The fastest trap in nature,
Sees sixteen colors with “primitive” eyes.
We see three: red, blue-green, blue.
Polychromatic sophistication?
If a mantis shrimp could laugh...

With six-million olfactory receptors,
Mom’s apple pie, vanilla, pumpkin spice
Are smells we enjoy.
And others: sweat, shit, decay,
Not so much.
With fifty times our receptor quota
What is the world to a dog?
Our eyes, its nose, different worlds.

Our eyes, phhht.
An eagle sees a running rabbit a league away,
Yummy rabbit.
Flowers give ultraviolet guides to bees, offering food;
We see bland yellows, reds, blues, whites.
A bat sees with its ears and a cat in the dark.

That cat flows through cracked doors,
its whiskers read the width,
While we shave our whiskers for fashion, taste,
or distaste.
Did you know that cats have whiskers on their paws?
If you put a cat in shoes, it would lose a bit of its world –
And be a lousy stalker.

But poor cat, it cannot taste sweet.
In a cat world, no candy makers, no apple pies.

With machines we sense a bit of what other animals do
But not as well and, perforce, transposed to our ranges –
But not smell, we're still hopeless in that world.
A dog's world, a bee's world, a shrimp's world
They're all our world and more,
Or less:
Multiple universes, overlapping.

Bob Edelson

WHAT IT'S REALLY WORTH

We went to a taping of *Antiques Road Show*, a television program where experts in various kinds of old objects examine what you bring and estimate its value. It turned out they were not impressed with the items we brought and didn't think they were worth much. We were disappointed, but that's when it occurred to me that old objects are mainly valuable if they have had importance in your life. We were nostalgic about the bric-a-brac they rejected. It was associated with events and people important to us in the past.

It is their objects' *nostalgia value* that convinces many of the show's hopeful clients that their objects are financially very valuable too. I no longer have a lot of things from the past, having made more than one downsizing move by now. But I remember them. I remember the pots and pans in my grandmother's kitchen. The old cast iron Dutch oven was heavy and had a slightly greasy feel. Great pot roasts had come out of it during its life. It had a cast iron disk insert that I could lift out, with holes of different sizes, just right for playing with the orphaned buttons from the family button box. Of course, it never had any monetary value.

I also greatly valued books and phonograph records from my childhood. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a big hardcover chapter book about the life of a fictional family, lives on in my memory though it was given away many years ago. Old long-play phonograph records of Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas in broken boxes always reminded me of good times long ago too.

Did you also keep things that lacked monetary worth but had a meaningful connection to your family or your life? Then let's not measure the worth of our *treasures* from the past by the value assigned by an appraiser, no matter how much we would enjoy a happy surprise. We can watch episodes of Antiques Road Show for entertainment but preserve the memory of things that enriched our lives and estimate their value in what they have meant to us.

Joyce Linda Sichel



L'AMÉRICAIN

In October 1983, I attended a conference in Marseille, France, on the subject of “street children.” My experience getting to that meeting turned out to be almost as fraught, though not as impactful, as what happened while I was there.

On short notice, I was asked to represent my agency at the conference. To complicate things, I had a toothache and, after a quick visit to the dentist, just made my flight, by taking a helicopter to JFK Airport. The evening was clear and below us the East River, with all the bridges illuminated, was a beautiful sight.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, the Novocain began to wear off and, while not in pain, my jaw felt stiff. By the time I arrived at the large guesthouse overlooking the city of Marseille, where participants were staying, it was getting harder to open my mouth.

By pointing and other gestures, along with the remnants of my college French, I was able to find my room and get something to eat. I had some hot chocolate, served in large handle-less cups, and some bread. I had to push the bread into my still partially closed mouth.

By morning, however, I was fine, more people were arriving, and most spoke English, so I mingled, making connections with people from different countries and cultures. I was interested in hearing about their work, and they were interested in what was being done in the U.S.

After the first day, I was asked to extend my stay to take part in a small working group. I was both surprised and pleased to be included as this was essentially a European get-together, attended not only by those working with street children, but also by high-ranking representatives of European governments and the United Nations. My office in New York approved my stay. However, I needed to change my return flight. To do that I would have to go down to the airline office in Marseille.

Unfortunately, there was a massive strike tying up the city which would have made getting there and back by taxi impossible. A conference staffer told me not to worry and introduced me to a senior police official who insisted that I take his car. I was shown to a luxury model Citroën, where I met the driver and several other plainclothes policemen. Their boss identified me as the “L’Américain.” One of the officers opened the door to the rear seat and bid me enter. He went around to the other side and joined me in the back while another man sat in front with the driver. Little did I know that when my police chauffeur put on a driving glove, it would be a harbinger of an adventure to come, one that I could have done without.

The first part of the journey took us down a road which spiraled steeply downward, something I had not recalled on my arrival in the dark. I could not help noticing, not because it was daylight, but because of the speed with which we descended. I couldn’t figure out how the driver kept from flying off the road.

When we got to the bottom, I breathed a premature sigh of relief. We were suddenly on an elevated

roadway with narrow shoulders on both sides. Other drivers responded obediently to the Citroën's siren by moving to the right, but that meant that we were partially in the oncoming lane, still moving at high speed. I saw some traffic approaching from the other direction and was certain that we would have to slow down. We didn't.

Just as the cars in our lane had moved onto the shoulder to let us pass, so did the oncoming vehicles as we careened down the middle of a busy highway. We were kept from being in a terrible accident by the consistent deference of the other motorists to a speeding police car and the remarkable skill of our driver. I couldn't help wondering if he was showing off, trying to scare the bejesus out of me, or whether he did this all the time. When we got downtown, the strike slowed traffic to a crawl. This did not stop our driver from aggressively weaving through the surrounding cars and trucks until we came to a complete stop, hemmed in on three sides by vehicles and the curb on the other. I relaxed for the first time since we departed.

We could see the sign of the airline office in the distance on our side of the street, but everything was frozen, sidewalk to sidewalk. So, of course, we drove *onto* the sidewalk and pedestrians scattered until we came to a halt right in front of the door of the airline. One of the officers alighted and opened my door for me while another held open the door to the building and then accompanied me inside. He signaled for someone to assist me although there were people already in line. I pointed to the end of the line to indicate that that's where I was headed only to be escorted to where an airline employee was waiting just for me. That none of the other

customers showed any interest or concern about my getting special treatment did little to assuage my guilt for jumping the queue.

First thing on the agenda for that day was a field trip to a poor community in Marseille. The plan was to meet the rest of the conference attendees there. I would be returning by chartered bus with the others when the visit was over.

I took some comfort from the fact that there was less traffic on the way and thus the driver was not required to further demonstrate his skills. He still managed to get me to the site of the meeting before any of my confreres had shown up.

On arrival, I was ushered out of the car and was greeted by the leader of a delegation from the mostly Arab community, who apparently assumed I was some kind of dignitary. French did not appear to be his first language. My combination of French, some English, and the inevitable gestures was not working. Wherever I looked, I saw men in suits with shoulder hostlers peeking out from underneath their jackets. Clearly, they were not locals but security personnel there to protect the bigwigs who had not yet arrived. Fortunately, the rest of the group got there a few minutes later and I became just another one of the visitors.

Undoubtedly, I received exceptional treatment in Marseille: the invitation to the post conference working group; the spectacular assistance provided by my personal police escort; and, generally, the regard due a very, very important person. It was evident that the principal reason for all this was that I was L'Américain, from the

mightiest nation on earth. Perhaps they thought that I had superior expertise or, more likely, access to special resources. The level of attention I received was personally both heady and humbling and left me with the indelible impression of both the real and perceived power of our country along with a heightened sense of responsibility for what we do with it.

John Cosgrove

VILLANELLE FOR ADELE*

I breathe your body in your bra and blanket the same
Arm and Hammer detergent brings you back to me
The way I held you when the angel came.

The way your head lay on my shoulder when the angel came
I thought I was free
of sadness but grief I cannot tame.

I think it's time to call you, lapsed I am
My mind scans reality
But no, I would forget; that angel came.

When we looked at each other, no words, no blame
I would do anything to see
Your celadon green eyes, but that angel came.

Where did you go when the angel came
For you? I wonder as I drink my green tea
You loved tea too and coffee. It's not the same.

Without you it is not a game
How radiant you must be
Sometimes it's hard to be left behind. The flame
Of you so bright when the angel came.

Elizabeth Larose

*a variation of the medieval French verse form

JOY IN EACH OTHER

What we have in our country is a grand hodgepodge of wonderful people who have the ability to get along happily together, should we only give it a try. I do realize this is “pie in the sky” thinking, but it is my way and I am a “people person.” One of my happiest memories is of the mixing and camaraderie within which I thrived at Molina School in Camden. I seemed to have passed their test and felt welcomed by some lovely people.

There was a dear woman from Ellicott City, MD, a teacher’s aide. The town was named Ellicott after my grandmother’s ancestors. So this teacher’s aide and I were like cousins. It didn’t matter in the slightest that she was brown and I was white. Our friendship gave me joy.

Another lovely friendship was with a fellow from Burlington City. He was a history buff and curious about Quaker life. We talked and talked about our different backgrounds. I even mentioned one day that some Quakers had kept slaves. I can still remember the great comic throwing of his hand across his brow at the horror and disillusionment of it. We did so love to talk.

My third and closest friend was the slender and elegant Miss Morris. Miss Morris could have been my real cousin. My mother told me long ago that one of the Morris relatives had married an African American but had not changed her name. I’ll never know the true story, which is lost in time. Miss Morris and I shared our joy in music. It was bursting out of both of us.

The greatest honor I had in Camden was when Miss Morris invited me to sing with a group of singers

from the school staff in a performance on the stage. I was the lone white person but was never made to feel the odd one out. I was welcomed and embraced. They took it upon themselves to make me feel and act black....AND I STRUTTED. There is a wonderful and distinctive walk when you enter the room and walk down the aisle. I'm not sure I could do it today, but on that day every step was measured and every footstep was carefully placed and the rhythm of unheard music was within us all. We gracefully mounted the stairs to the stage and formed a straight line with our sisters. Our hearts and our souls were blended, AND WE SANG. I shall never forget it.

And I shall never forget the possibility which is there for each one of us – the possibility that we can look out at the stranger who is in some way different from us, and in that stranger we can see a friend.

Edith Roberts

WRITING FOR LEAS LIT

We encourage residents of both campuses to submit original, unpublished manuscripts for possible inclusion in Leas Lit, Medford Leas' literary journal, which is published in June and December each year. We distribute flyers inviting submissions, with details about how to do so. There are deadlines of March 31st and September 30th for the two issues. Manuscripts received after a deadline will be considered for the next issue.

The Editorial Committee (blind as to authorship) judges which of the submitted pieces will be accepted for publication. Each resident may submit one story and one poem for each issue. Neither book reviews nor scholarly papers will be accepted. All submissions must be in English and not exceed 1600 words.

All stories and poems that have appeared in issues of Leas Lit since 2005 are available in the "Literary Journal" section of mlra.org (public website) by author and titles. This is updated for each new issue. You can use it for research or to find examples of accepted writing.

If you have a story or a poem to tell – true or fictional – or feelings to share, let us hear from you. We will be reaching out in the coming months.

