

LEXINGTON
LifeTimes
A CREATIVE ARTS JOURNAL
ISSUE 10 | SUMMER 2022





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ABOUT THIS JOURNAL

*In 2017, the Friends of the Lexington Council on Aging first launched the bi-annual publication of LEXINGTON **LifeTimes**: A CREATIVE ARTS JOURNAL with a grant from the FCOA-funded Bright Ideas program. This tenth issue showcases the creative talents of 17 seniors who live or work in Lexington.*

An editorial board of volunteers sets the criteria for submission and selects entries for inclusion. Distribution is primarily electronic with a limited number of copies printed.

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You can support the Journal, and the activities of the FCOA, by making a gift to the Friends of the Lexington Council on Aging. If you wish to be recognized as a Patron, please note this on your check or on the donation envelope or online form. Please help to keep this popular publication going!

Submission guidelines for future editions as well as information on how to support the Journal and FCOA can be found on the Friends of the Lexington Council on Aging website:

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ON THE COVERS

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BY PAM SMITH

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The Ballad Peddler Heads South

BY NANCY KOUCHOUK



DESERT WINDS WERE STILL COOL as darkness lifted. Nazira glanced at her husband and son's vacant pallets. She draped her long headscarf over her abaya. The tin basin she carried pinged against her gold funerary bracelet as she left the hut. Her mother must be looking down from above. A crow screeched from the sycamore tree. The flapping of wings echoed.

She came to the Kheir River at the end of the dirt path. The purple dawn revealed silhouettes of trees that rustled like spirits departed. She descended up to her waist and filled her mouth with palmfuls of water. Her ablutions cleansed her. The basin received its fill. She steadied the rim as it balanced on her head. Her bare feet squished in a measured beat as she walked back. Her heart was heavy.

She poured water into the clay *olla* where it would stay cool on the earthen floor. Something about this ritual comforted her. The prayer mat was placed facing east. She bowed and knelt, her head touching the

silken threads. She prayed for calm, hoping to quell her fiery nature.

A hive of thoughts erupted. She couldn't compete with the river. It was like a timepiece with forward motion. But the past did not own her. She walked out with a determined stride and followed the curve of the river. In a desert, no one owns the water.

Clouds were fluid. Soon the sky would clear. Nazira watched from the riverbank. As she removed the wedding band from her finger, a gull flew low nearly hitting her head. She threw, reciting a confusion of words, and the water resounded with a gentle plink. She dropped to her knees, hidden by long-fingered reeds, and lit a cigarette. Her cough startled the quiet as birds shuddered from the trees. Her husband's boat drifted in the distance. *Kaif* was painted on its bow.

Khalid felt love was never simple. Its harsh energy of opposites was exhausting. Like the fisherman who struggles with his line against a fish whose mouth is built to defend, the battle was ongoing. Love was vocal with

noise and need. His only reprieve was out on the water. *Kaif* conveyed a wakeful passivity, an absence of discord. Whenever *Kaif* launched, Khalid returned to the tranquil sounds of water and wind.

His *felucca* sat low in the Kheir. Oar dips echoed as the boat glided into place. Father and son bent and straightened over coiled lines. Water nomads, their wide-brimmed hats limply gestured. Words fell slack between them. The boy tipped his face into the nascent sun as he munched the last of a shawarma sandwich. When their metal pails slapped with fish, they would harness the wind with hemp and canvas in a long familiar dance. Nets lay ready beneath their feet.

Ahmad began to beat rhythmic words of song on the gunnel with his hands. His father stared at the water. The fishing rod triggered tension in his arms. He raised his line taut, then released. He pulled hard, leaning back, to surface the fish. It writhed powerfully sending glittering droplets. With a vehement whip of its tail, it detached from the hook: a silver arrow. Gone. A bad omen. The stink of marsh reed and body odor were strong. Regret had a bitter taste.

Nazira was indignant. "How dare he complain that I 'retreat to the blank pages of my notebook' when he journeys towards an endless horizon?" The words steamed as they burst from her mouth. She stood now as the sun crested above. She had no answers. Like a feral cat, her old bones craved warmth. The south beckoned.

She was schooled in letters. Most villagers were not versed in the power of small black lines that covered a book's pages. The ink stains on her fingers came with a price. Would they earn her coins for ballads sung, or would they reward her with a curse that would not wash off? Her husband used to call her "my songbird thrush". She left him

wed to his shotgun, a stalker of fish and fowl.

Ahmad followed his father. The cruelty of abandoning her son broke in hot spokes of despair, closing off her throat. She fingered the pearl he had given her on the chain around her neck. It was once an irritant in the bed of an oyster. The river sucked them away from her.

Her satchel was heavy. She wondered how long water and tobacco, money, bread, onion, and cheese would last. From the corner of her eye, a white paper floated past. An egret, rooted in a watery glade at river's edge, seemed lifeless. One long, pencil-thin leg stood stiff, the other bent mid-air. Black pin-prick eyes were lost in white feathers above a long, sleek neck. Its beak pointed south. Before she could take a breath, a silvery fish had been speared and swallowed. A good omen.

The ballad peddler hummed as she tunneled down the thickly reeded path away from the river. Cigarettes would stave off hunger. Being in motion and traveling desert roads made her feel young again. She would sing ballads, interpret coffee grounds, and read Tarot cards to make ends meet. She walked faster now and began to sing. Flowers shivered their petals as she passed. Doves called out in response.

The wind stung with heat. Dust blew into her mouth. Like the heady scent of jasmine that clung to her abaya, she intuited her direction. A nomad by nature, she ate wildflowers and herbs. Cuts on her skin healed and digestion improved. Her journal was full of notes and illustrations drawn on papyrus. Margins were etched with mud-brick structures that years later she found replicated in a remote village of her ancestors. As a child, she had been given a donkey with a jagged stripe down its back. Ziggy was her first companion. He always knew the way home.

The ballad peddler divined where currents would allow a safe foothold. Plants flourished when the Kheir breached its banks. The wash of black silt was an alchemy that intrigued her. Landowners dug irrigation ditches that transformed the countryside into a green oasis. She observed, tasted, and touched in her quest to absorb nature's mysteries.

Walking sharpened her mind. She was a slight woman, but wiry muscles defined her limbs. Desert life had been carved into her wrinkled body. A small space was visible between her front teeth when she spoke. This friendly flaw coupled with her direct gaze was inviting. People were drawn to her. They were simple folk in the south, easy to read.

She walked for hours along the riverbank until she came to Madiba. Workers were coming from the fields to rest in the shade. A sugarcane stall, backed by a stand of six-foot cut stalks, drew them. Juice was extracted by a hand-cranked press, then filtered. They gathered in a queue. The light brown *asiir* washed down their bread and cheese. This respite defined the rhythm of their day.

"Good morning, my beauty," greeted the vendor. His hands moved as he spoke, animated by hospitality. "You have come a long way. Please sit." Bowing slightly, he open-palmed a plastic milk crate for her to rest on. She took the glass cup he offered. The sweet liquid coursed down her parched throat. She thanked him and went to sit on the bleached undergrowth near the field workers.

"My father was murdered, my mother craved fame. Neither in his cold, damp tomb can pronounce my name," she sang, her voice hypnotic. Pain was no stranger to the ballad peddler. Her satchel hung from around her neck. It freed her creaky shoulder joints, letting her arms swing when she walked.

"Land of my soul, sand of my people," she continued. "The river that feeds you will never deceive you."

She stood and walked into the Kheir, her empty cup in hand. She advanced into the flowing current. She called out "kheir" which meant the "goodness of giving". The people responded as the word flew back and forth. Her black abaya swirled around her with a wild abandon. She returned with a clear cup of water free of discolor and debris.

"A drink of water is a sacred act," she declared. Women, some with tattooed chins, felt a chill run through them. In the near distance, along the dirt road, a camel burdened by a mountain of cane eyed her young one skirting in front, then behind. "Do not dismiss those desert dogs with stick legs and knobby knees. They are the bridge from desert to city. They carry a well of water within." Nazira swallowed the cupful.

A hawk cried bleakly above. For a moment, the women and men were stunned. Their hands came together with sound, and a man's voice shouted unrestrained. Someone pointed to where the ballad peddler had been seated. The cup was retrieved and circulated. It quickly filled with coins. Her ballads were threads that wove peasants into a tribe. She felt their nod of approval. She gave hope, and in return felt lifted with spirit.

A man at the back of the group had arrived on horseback and stopped to buy juice. He had witnessed the occasion and was captivated by the woman's words. The sun burned as he drank, watching the field hands slowly return to work. By the river reeds where the woman had been seated, the undergrowth was now a brilliant circle of green. Her headscarf was visible as she walked away. He followed her. ♦

Aroma Maker

BY JAYANTHI RANGAN

My mom smelled of sewing machines
As she entered a room
Echoing a faint whirr of the Singer pedal
And the odor of oil she'd drip
Into centimeter wide holes
There was an aura of thrift and restraint
A brisk knowing hemmed in chores
Today I get that complex trace
In an auto-body shop

My fragrance is an honesty that lets out
My gender and identity into the open
I am wrapped in a whiff of paycheck
And bold activism
I smell like Dunkin coffee
Wakefulness and stirrings
I smell of building muscles
And gym sweat
I am my dog I cuddle
And guileless animal love
The mustiness of my room
And relaxed medley of chaos

Eulogy for a “Bag Lady”

BY ANITA MYER

Mary Kilroy. Compact and wispy-haired,
Unblossomed rose—an unripened woman.
The Catholicism of welcoming all children
Except that tiny one.
Left on the doorstep tearful and frightened,
Sealed in a state hospital for long years,
Mary was a refugee seeking asylum, but never finding it.

Daily Mary hauled her precious chariot cart
To a luncheonette spreading her earthly possessions,
Food, and staked her claim across a table.
Subsuming time and space,
She ignored the frowning patrons.
But this was Mary’s place, her posting in the town.
Mary, feisty and gruff, a peevish shell
Sheathed like a prickly chestnut,
Refused the world as the world had refused her.

As a hireling aide in a workshop,
Mary vigilantly guarded her belongings and bristled in anger
While shielding her meager effects from the curiosity of others.
Occasionally swift blows were dealt to those trespassers
Curiously regarding her personal belongings.

Mary was well recognized, familiar yet unseen.
She enjoyed her annual day of indulgence—
A visit to a beauty school for a fifty-cent cut and hairstyle,
Bargain basement shopping for new house dresses,
And crowned by a sumptuous lunch at Friendly’s restaurant
Afterward modeling for the community caretaking staff
Who clapped and cheered admiring her glamour for the day.

Nocturnal explorer and wanderer,
Mary was extinguished by a car
After a midnight excursion to Dunkin Donuts.
Wingless angel whose unseen presence
Lives on in the shadows of many
Unknown by most, grieved by none.

Cut and Paste

Mixed-media collage artist, PAM SMITH, combines color, texture, and pattern with a sense of fun and whimsy to create visually intense images. Social justice, spirituality, and nature are common themes expressed in her works to convey a deeper message.



On Top of the World (2021)

24" x 18"



Serenity (2020)

24" x 18"



Look for the Light. Always (2020)

24" x 18"



Wisdom Arrives (2021)

24" x 18"

Who's There

BY JOHN R. EHRENFELD

The serenade begins soon after dark.
Right on schedule almost every night.
Sounding different than a wren or lark,
An owl begins his eerie, strigine rite.
The cadence of hoots says I am a he
Calling to let the neighborhood birds know
That I am desperate to find a she.
I would make a wise and wonderful beau.
Quite invisible to my searching eyes,
Well hid in the towering, bushy trees,
Protected by the darkening night skies,
The owl yearns to find his avian squeeze.
 With such a tiny vocabulary
 It's hard to persuade someone to marry.

Before Samantha

BY IRENE HANNIGAN

“WHAT DID I EVER DO before the GPS?” I asked myself the other day as I dutifully listened to Samantha who is my navigational lifeline. I have absolutely no sense of direction. I consider it to be a disability of sorts. In fact, a recent Google search offered the label DTD for my condition — Developmental Topographical Disorientation.

I so admire my friends who have maps in their heads and intuitively know which way to go. My husband never fails to note the location of the sun, as an indicator of east or west. That would never occur to me.

I get lost in parking garages and parking lots. As a teacher, I helped students develop compensatory strategies to address their diagnosed disabilities and thankfully I have developed a few to address mine. I pay serious attention when I park to notice the locations of various signs and landmarks. The clicker on my key ring can point me in the right direction providing I’m close enough for the yellow car lights to start blinking.

While Samantha helps me compensate for my poor navigational skills, this wasn’t always the case. About to visit a friend I hadn’t seen in many years, I opened my car’s glove compartment and noticed a small, pink notebook hidden underneath a stack of brown paper napkins. This little notebook had been a valuable compensatory strategy prior to meeting high tech Samantha.

As I flipped through the pages, I felt as if I was looking through a photo album. When I spotted directions to Puppet Showplace in Brookline, Whalom Park in Lunenburg, and The Grand David Magic Company in Beverly I realized I had begun this notebook when my son Ted was a toddler. Interspersed among

the pages to our favorite restaurants were also directions to the homes of his various childhood friends — Cody and Kirby, Derry and Julia. I thought about their moms and the enjoyable time that I had spent with them and how our friendships grew over the years along with those of our children.

Entries for Country Curtains in Sudbury, Able Rugs in Allston, and Home Depot in Waltham appeared shortly after we moved to Lexington. I laughed when I saw directions to my new home both from 128 North and 128 South and recalled how often I consulted these entries when I was on the highway. I even had directions to my parents’ house in Port St. Lucie, Florida from the West Palm Beach airport so I could find my way to 1398 S.E. LaRose Court when we visited during school vacations.

Many pages brought back memories of my last job in Chelmsford: directions to the Worcester Centrum for the annual Down Syndrome Conference, the Sheraton Hotel in Hyannis where I attended the annual principals’ conference each May with my colleagues, and Lowell General Hospital which reminded me how it had been my practice to ride behind the ambulance when a student had a mishap on the playground.

It shouldn’t have been surprising that it took so many years to avail myself of a GPS when I realized how long it had taken me to get a smart phone. While I’m happy that I finally made the transition to Samantha, I am not about to discard that little pink notebook with the pressed wildflowers framed and encased under plastic on the front cover. It is filled with much more than my GPS could ever provide. ♦

The General

BY MOUNA MALOOF ANDERSON

In 1944, as the Second World War drew to an end in Europe, the citizens of Zahle, Lebanon learned that the famous French General, Charles de Gaulle, would visit their city. At a ceremony honoring the general, a child would present him with a bouquet. I was that child.

Zahle is a small city near the edge of the Beqaa Valley, about forty miles east of Beirut. Its houses and shops rise steeply from both sides of the Berdowni River valley. They climb the mountain sides in crazy quilts of flat-roofed stucco houses nestled among red-roofed rectangular stone buildings. A multitude of small gardens adds a welcome green to the landscape.

Our house, the Abou Raji homestead, perched on the highest buildable point of the west slope. For decades, this had been the home of my ancestors; now I lived here with my parents and two brothers.

Soosan, my mother, had come to Zahle in 1935 as a bride. She was intelligent, beautiful, and charismatic. Before long, she was a sought-after friend and hostess of all of the notable families in town. It is to her popularity and the esteem she had earned that I owe this story.

ONE SUNNY DAY IN JUNE, I was playing on the patio with my brother, Naji, when my mother's lively voice caught my attention. She was calling excitedly to my father as she ran up the cement steps from the lower terrace to the garden and patio above. She spoke in short, breathless exhalations. "Philip, Philip, where are you? Come quickly!" My father, praying that no calamity had befallen his family, emerged from the arched doorway.

"While I was in town, I ran into the mayor." Mother continued, wiping perspiration from her brow and upper lip. "He said he was just on his way to our house with a special request. Philip, you'll never guess what he wanted."

"For heaven's sake, Soosan, tell me what this is all about!"

"General Charles de Gaulle is leaving

Algeria and returning to France to form a provisional government."

"Of course I know that, but what does that have to do with us?"

"It seems that he will be stopping in Lebanon on his way to France and is coming to Zahle for some meeting or another."

"Really?" exclaimed my father. "I didn't know that Zahle was such an important place! Perhaps he is coming to enjoy the delicious food at the charming cafes on the shores of the Berdowni River, the Wadi."

Now my parents had my full attention. At the age of five, the name of Charles de Gaulle meant nothing to me. It was mention of the Wadi that caused me to listen intently.

The Wadi was my favorite place in Zahle. Wadi means valley. This Wadi, a narrow slot between two mountains with a river



The author's parents, Philip and Soosan Maloof, with their children, Mouna, Naji and Sami, in Zahle, 1944.

flowing through it, was a cool haven even on the hottest days. Its thriving cafes and restaurants were always filled with happy revelers, delicious food, and good music. Near the entrance, vendors sold ice cream, balloons, candy, toys, and all sorts of baubles. For us children, an outing to the Wadi was a rare treat and I hoped that the conversation between my parents would eventually lead us there.

“Or maybe,” my mother replied, drily, “he is coming here because Zahle is so deeply involved in French-Lebanese politics.

But I haven’t told you the most exciting news! There will be a reception for General de Gaulle at Hotel Kadri and the mayor wants our little girl to present the general with a bouquet of flowers!”

My father groaned inwardly. He had reason to groan. The war had depleted the family finances and he knew that this “great honor” would be expensive for him.

Besides, my father was an American citizen. He was not enthusiastic about honoring a French general who was not popular in the United States. Nevertheless, Father simply sighed and went along with the plan. To do otherwise would disappoint my mother and bring shame on the family.

For the next week, Zahle was abuzz with excited anticipation. As word passed from person to person, a mood of energetic excitement floated up the slope of the mountain and into our home. For me, excited anticipation was mixed with anxiety. I was not sure exactly what would be expected of me.

The only one who seemed indifferent was my father. His quiet demeanor calmed me.

On the appointed day, I was thoroughly scrubbed, my hair washed and combed into Shirley Temple curls. I was dressed in a simple blue dress trimmed in white. With white

Mary Jane shoes on my feet and a gigantic white taffeta ribbon anchored to my curls, I was ready to go. The blue cotton of my favorite dress felt soft and cool against my skin. The clip that held my ribbon together gripped my hair tightly yet did not hurt. I felt pretty and proud. Outwardly, I may have looked calm but a flutter of anxiety filled me.

Leaving my brothers at home, my parents and I started our trip to town.

Any other day, we would have walked. Today, in order to stay clear of the dust of the street and the heat of the sun, we rode in a taxi. It took no more than ten minutes for the taxi to navigate the narrow, winding streets from our house to the hotel. Before we knew it, we were climbing the broad stone steps that led to the hotel terrace.

Built in the early 20th century with stone walls, a red-tiled roof, and a fountained courtyard, Hotel Kadri was and still is a fine example of traditional Lebanese architecture.

Mother took my hand and led me slowly across the marbled courtyard, my shoes clicking against its hard sun-washed surface, my heart beating hard with excitement and nerves. The warm feel of Mother’s hand, the burbling sound of the fountain, and the beautiful sight of purple petunias and hydrangeas in the flowerbeds soothed me. For the moment, I forgot my jitters.

My parents and I made our way across the terrace. We passed through an arched wooden doorway and entered the reception hall.

After walking a short distance and turning right, we found ourselves in a very large reception room filled with people.

It seemed to me that the entire population of Zahle had squeezed into that hotel reception room. The mayor was there, of course, standing proudly in his freshly pressed business suit. The rest of the crowd,



*General Charles de Gaulle, the tall man on the right, in Zahle, Lebanon.
The author's cousin, the Bishop of the Bekaa, Bishop Joseph Maalouf is at the extreme left.
Photo from the archives of Charles Malouf Samaha.*

which seemed like hundreds of people, blended into a hazy blur of faces

The air was heavy with the heat of the day and the exhalations of the crowd. Thankfully, a breeze wafted through the open windows bringing with it the sweet fragrance of jasmine.

At the front of the room, a very tall, powerful-looking man faced the crowd. He wore a khaki suit with a black belt encircling his waist. A long, muscular neck supported a proud face with a prominent nose.

That must be General de Gaulle, I thought. Suddenly I was nervous again. General de Gaulle was making a forceful speech in a voice more tenor than baritone. My entire life I had listened to Mother and her friends speaking in French, so I had no difficulty recognizing, though not understanding, the language.

A self-important looking man thrust a bouquet of flowers into my hands. It was a gigantic, artful arrangement of red roses, white carnations and deep blue iris, all

tied together with a blue ribbon. Mother whispered in my ear: "The man who is speaking is General de Gaulle. When he finishes, hand the flowers to him and say 'Ahlan wa sahan' to welcome him.

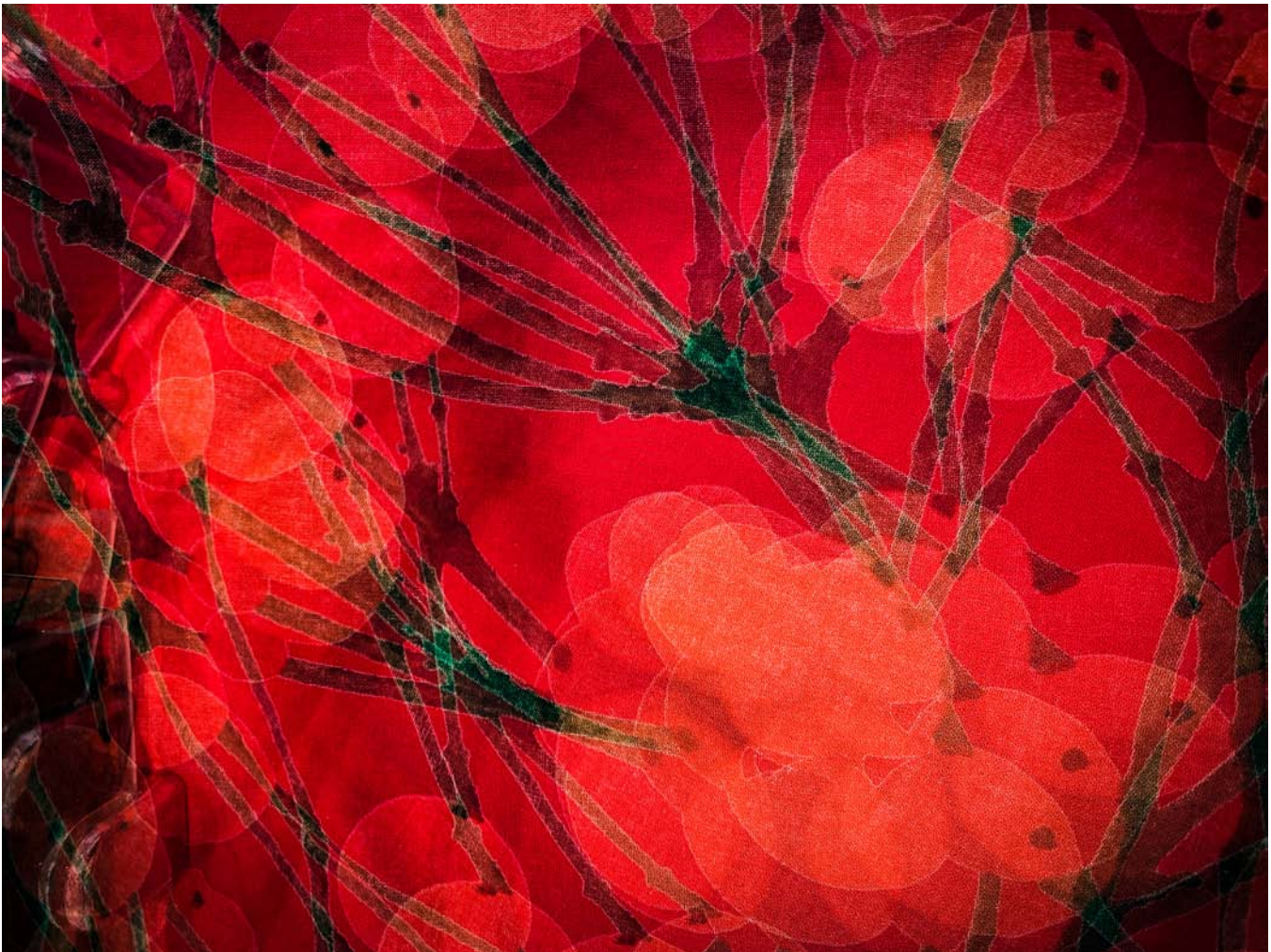
The speech ended. I started to walk toward the general. The lovely fragrance of roses and carnations was having a strange effect on me. A tickle in my throat was followed by a loud "Achoo!" as I sneezed. My nose started to run.

I never got to say "Ahlan wa sahan." Tears of mortification and sorrow slid down my cheeks. I looked foolish in front of the entire town. I had disappointed Mother and Father.

Seeing my distress, the general took one or two steps towards me. He smiled kindly at me as he reached into his pocket. Bending down, he used a large white handkerchief to gently dry my eyes and my nose. Then, graciously accepting the flowers, he kissed my cheek, saying, "Merci, ma petite. Les fleurs sont tres joli." ♦

Moving Images

NICOLE MORDECAI's photography captures the beauty of trees and flowers using in-camera techniques rather than digital post-processing. The results are elegantly blurred or overlapping images that give a suggestion of motion. These images are made up of 4 to 7 exposures, with the camera being rotated or moved diagonally for each shot.



Berry Branch Tangle (2021)



Hydrangea Swirl (2021)



Translucent Hibiscus (2021)

Zoom Tomb

BY JOHN R. EHRENFELD

Growing older hastens the loss of one's senses. The pandemic has hurried the process along. Too much of my day is spent in two dimensions. The real, alive third one has been swallowed by my 27-inch, 4K Retina display. Brilliant and crisp, but still flat as a pancake. Its billion colors dazzle the eye, but dull the brain.

Zooming used to sound like something enjoyable, like sledding or skiing down a snow-covered slope. Now it is yawn-producing. No motion involved, except for eyeballs jumping from one little square to another, as ears strain to make sense of the mostly garbled sound, a task made even harder by the noise from someone's unmuted computer that lights up their square on the screen. No hiding out!

Lip-reading skills would be helpful for all the times someone forgets to unmute. But, then, my classmates—many in their eighties—are getting forgetful and still a bit frightened by the technology that their fearless grandchildren all take for granted.

I don't want to become a very good zoomer and forget how to re-connect to the real world of 3-D, and the real people I care about. But will COVID-19 vanish before my brain has become so completely addled that I'll need an Oculus virtual-reality headset to provide physical therapy for my head?

I know I still cannot venture out into that familiar, pre-pandemic world; it's too risky for me and others. Zoom brings a little of that back into my life. I have to be very sure I don't mistake its draw for the warmth of a hug. ♦

On the Significance of 90

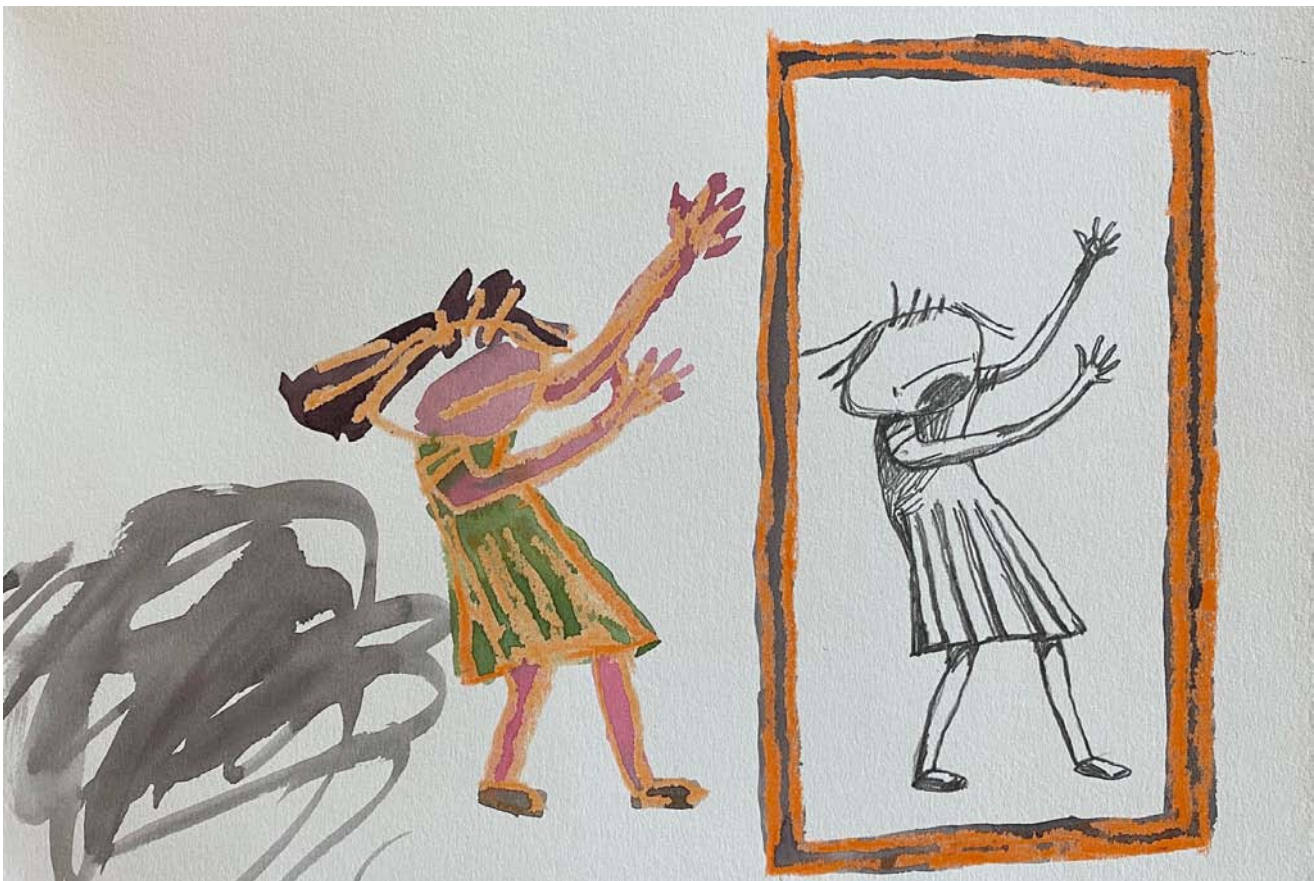
BY JOHN R. EHRENFELD

If I were a car, it could get me arrested.
It measures the temp on a steamy, summer day.
It merits an A on a test someone bested,
Or, perhaps, the score of a so-so golfer's play.
But for me, it comes as an extremely rare gift,
A sign of a life full of both sorrow and joy,
An uncertain beginning that set me adrift,
A failed marriage, a bruised ego, a loved lost boy.
But, then the scales of life reversed, and I found Ruth—
More precisely, she found me. Ever since, my life
Has been nothing but flourishing—that is the truth.
A bit of luck at times, but the real cause is my wife.
I do wonder what I would say at 95
If, by some strange miracle, I were still alive.

Grumpy Girl

“ The inspiration for these drawings came when I realized that, contrary to a lot of my peers, there is a part of me that has never forgiven my father for the way he behaved when I was growing up. I used crayon and pencil because these are the tools children use to express themselves. Also, I had an unused box of 64 Crayola Crayons that was tantalizing me. I used gouache because I loved the way the crayon resisted it. The resultant drawings make ample use of the pout, with the overall message that little girls will be seen and heard. So start listening!”

ANNE JOHNSTONE



Color AND Black and White (2020)

7.5" x 11"



Fighting Back (2020)

7.5" x 11"



What Goes Around, Comes Around (2020)

7.5" x 11"

My Year of Cancer during Covid

BY HELEN EPSTEIN

IT'S NEVER A GOOD TIME to be diagnosed with cancer but spring of 2020 was particularly unfortunate. Almost 7,500 people had died of Covid in Massachusetts, and thousands more were sick. In March, my husband and I had gone into virtual lock-down. I canceled routine dental and medical check-ups, including my pelvic ultrasound, scheduled for April 17. Then, I had unexpected bleeding.

On May 20, I drove down an uncannily deserted I-95 to have the procedure. Fear of Covid had solved Boston's famous traffic issues. The medical facility was as desolate as a Hopper painting. One entry point, a team of masked interrogators, no significant others, Purell for the hands, fresh mask for the face, one demarcated route to the designated department. My test results showed an abnormally thickened endometrial lining and I was scheduled for a biopsy on June 5.

My fear of the endometrial biopsy overshadowed Covid that week: I prepared for it with painkillers and a sedative, and asked my husband to drive me. By then, new cases in Massachusetts had dropped to only 494 but traffic was still sparse and the parking lot deserted. The biopsy was excruciating but I was so relieved it was behind me that I didn't ruminate about the results.

Instead, my husband and I were focused on tracking Covid across the world, and political violence in the U.S. My gynecologist

Dr. Uchechi Wosu is an immigrant of Nigerian parentage; her assistant, whose hand I clutched during the biopsy, is Haitian. I've known both women for a while but June 5 was the first time I wondered how often the two of them, like the five African-American kids I watched growing up on my street, were routinely stopped. Two days earlier, we had joined hundreds of our neighbors taking a knee for George Floyd on a mile-long section of Massachusetts Avenue that was part of Paul Revere's midnight ride in 1775. It was only on June 10 (267 news cases in Massachusetts), when my doctor gave me the diagnosis of endometrial cancer and sent me to a surgeon at Mass General in Boston, that fear of cancer regained its usual prominence.

Getting diagnosed with the illness was a shock but the twin pandemics provided context. I had coping skills, since the book I was promoting at that time was my mother's memoir of surviving racial and political violence, as well as the then-lethal disease of typhus. More than 118,000 Americans had died across the United States by then and my priorities were very clear. I was focused on seizing each day, maintaining close contact with family members and friends in the U.S., and keeping tabs on others in more stringent lockdowns in Italy, France, the Czech Republic, Argentina, Israel and California.

The medical facility was as desolate as a Hopper painting.

Cancer has been around since ancient times and is far better understood than the coronavirus. Waiting for surgery seemed far less stressful to me than the challenges for people losing their jobs, homes, savings, and facing unchecked domestic violence and food insecurity. My friends who have had cancer treatments for years worry far more about catching Covid. A New Yorker with leukemia traverses Central Park every three weeks for chemo, dodging maskless joggers and cyclists. Now I was sharing her vulnerability and anger as the Trump administration and its enablers downplayed Covid, touted the benefits of bleach, and mocked the wearing of masks.

On June 12, my husband drove me to Mass General in downtown Boston for my appointment with the surgeon. Covid was moving west and there were “only” 392 new cases in Massachusetts that day, but still little traffic. People with heart problems, cancer, and other serious conditions had stopped coming to hospitals. At Admissions, there seemed to be more staff than patients.

I was the only person in the elevator to the oncology floor. Though it was 10:00 a.m., I walked down a corridor that looked like an airport terminal at midnight, with a long row of empty seats looking out over a deserted Boston. Halfway to the waiting room, a woman stopped two feet away from me. Through her mask, she blurted out that in March she had been on the operating table prepped to go, when her cancer op was abruptly canceled. Covid, I thought, had worn down even fabled Yankee reticence.

My husband was parked on the top floor of a garage where there was internet access. I texted him photos and updates: a handful of patients in a waiting room meant for 50; the quick check-in and blood draw and chest X-Ray, and EKG. Half the 90 operating rooms

were inactive. As my blood was drawn and chest X-rayed, I worried about technicians’ faces close to my own and how many hands affixed tubes and tabs to my skin.

MGH is not only a world-class hospital but an oasis of multiculturalism, and since there were far fewer patients than usual, our conversations were, I thought, more personal than usual. A white male nurse described his spleen surgery just prior to the lockdown. He and his pregnant wife had deliberately scheduled it before her due date, but the pandemic had complicated plans. His immune system was weakened but he felt safe inside the hospital. MGH was a community of responsible people. But a South Asian technician noted the problem getting to work if you couldn’t walk or commute in your own car. She tried to distance herself from other passengers on public transportation but someone inevitably sat down right next to her. And the line at Starbucks was dicey, with some customers refusing to wear a mask. Getting her daily latte had become a risk.

Lying hooked-up to an EKG machine in a hospital, I understood the fragility of daily human interactions and how a person you don’t know exists can unwittingly threaten your life. Even in educated Lexington, some people walk or run paths in the woods without masks and dog-walkers let their dogs off-leash, then argue when asked to obey the law. After Central Park birdwatcher Chris Cooper video-recorded his incident with a dog-walker, I began bringing my iPhone with me to the woods.

My meeting that morning with surgeon AK Goodman (white, wearing mask, face-shield, and cowboy boots) recalled unhurried doctor appointments in the pre-HMO 1950s, when physicians searched your face instead of the computer screen. Then, with my husband on

speaker phone we discussed the details of surgery, scheduled for June 25. My uterus, fibroids, fallopian tubes, ovaries, cervix and appendix would be removed by a laparoscopic procedure. I would have general anesthesia and a breathing tube. The operation would take three to four hours, with an additional three to four hours recovery time.

I had two weeks to prepare. I organized my house and garden and a group email list. I continued to follow the course of Covid and the protests. I kept calm by listening to music and watching as many movies as I could (including the movie of Hamilton). I stayed steady until June 23, when the prospect of the compulsory pre-op nasal swab for Covid unnerved me. I was so nervous that when I asked for a wheelchair to get from the parking lot to the testing tent, the girlish technician in PPE suggested I stay in my car. I held my husband's hand, and luckily, Dr. Fauci was testifying before Congress and on the car radio.

The surgery on June 25 also seemed minimal compared to the news. On that day, the U.S. had set another record for new coronavirus cases, some 40,000. The daily death toll was about 700 and at least 24 million Americans had been infected while the U.S. Department of Justice filed a brief asking the Supreme Court to invalidate the Affordable Care Act, part of a decade-long Republican crusade. The Trump administration was urging states to reopen and people to go back to work, and rejecting the use of masks.

Waking up in Mass General on June 26, I was grateful to be in a state whose governor and Congressional delegation defend science. For the next week, I spent hours online. How did people in the pandemic of 1918 manage without it?

By July 10, when we drove back into Boston for a follow-up, new Covid cases in

Massachusetts were down to 213, but surges in the South and Southwest had pushed the number of new cases in the United States to 71,000. Florida alone reported 11,433 new cases – making it a new hotspot – but its Republican governor declared he would not slow down Florida's reopening. Disney World was opening the doors to its Magic Kingdom.

Only patients – still no significant others – were being allowed into MGH in the fifth month of the pandemic and there was no one in the elevator with me when I took it up to the still deserted ninth floor. With my husband listening in from the garage roof, Dr. Goodman gave me the results of my surgery. The good news was that I have Stage 1A endometrial cancer, caught very early. The bad news was that I would be returning to MGH for six cycles of chemotherapy that would take me well past Election Day 2020.

I was lucky that my gynecologist insisted that I have a biopsy during the Covid epidemic. I was lucky that the cancer was caught early, that it is well-studied. But my wellbeing – and the wellbeing of us all – continues to depend not just on luck but on a fragile web of strangers and friends. It depends on responsible political leaders who prioritize the public good over their re-election prospects and on my journalist colleagues, some of whose work has come to resemble the propaganda of the Soviet era more than investigative reporting. Most of all, it continues to depend on people who shrug off inconvenience and observe the measures that have defeated Covid in other countries.

On July 25, I started chemo. Two years after my diagnosis, I've been declared cancer-free. Covid is still prevalent but at least almost all of my neighbors have been vaccinated and boosted. I feel lucky to be living Lexington and lucky to have gotten through it. ♦

The Silence of Stone

BY ELIZABETH ROZAN

Visually, you are a shape,
in this case a circle--round,
with just a hint of sharp edge,
almost forming a square.

An ancient shape, ancestral,
like the crochet doilies covering dust
on a mahogany lamptable,
or the filigree complexity of bobbin lace.
Then there is color—
more white than gray,
almost like a cloud,
and almost like the ocean wave froth.
If time were a factor,
you would turn to marble,
with ancient lines embedded randomly.
The potential is there.
Then there are unique features...
a pinpoint of black leading to a core, a center,
a rabbit hole of shifting proportions
familiar to the inner Alice.
If I look long enough,
there are hints, ever so distant,
of other colors—
pink like rose quartz, and sea green, and sand.
When I look long enough,
I see the pulse of your breath,
the calm quiet rhythm
of how you take in life

and give it back,
like a yogi;
like Mother Ocean, alive,
effervescent, deep, and forever.

Natural Selection



GRACE CHU
Green Heron and Frog: He Got Away! (2021)

Photography



RUIMIN WENG
Dancing Egrets (2020)

Photography



RUIMIN WENG
On Swan Lake (2020)

Photography

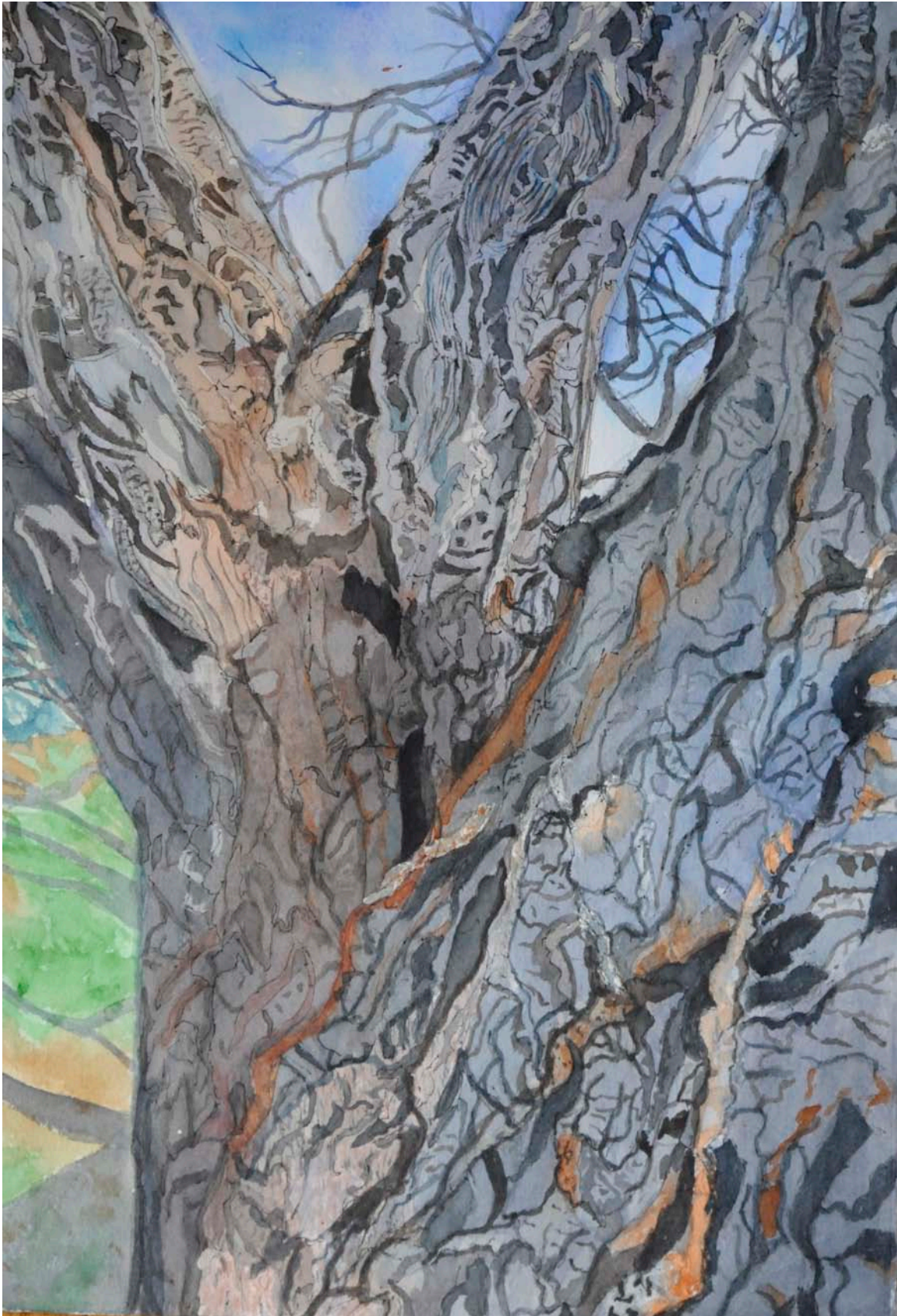


YEMEN DRAGON TREE
(*dracaena cinnabari*) Used for:
Resin - wound healing, stopping
bleeding, conjunctivitis
Leaves, flowers, fruit - animal fodder
Leaf fibers - rope
Flowers - honey

ON THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION
Due to: increasing dryness,
over-population of goats
war

DIANA BAILEY
Yemen Dragon Tree (2020)

Textile Art
32" x 24"



HELEN LUTTON COHEN
Mt. Auburn Cemetery Cork Tree (2010)

Watercolor
11" x 15"

How My Father Met My Mother

BY LESLIE R. BRODY

AT MY DAUGHTER'S WEDDING, my 95-year-old father, sporting a new herringbone suit, crisp white shirt, and black bowtie, slowly made his way down the aisle toward the chuppah. He leaned on his walker for support, eyes focused on the ground. He had fractured his hip three months previously, seven months after my mother had died, losing his balance and falling while waving to someone at his assisted living center.

The wedding guests, silently rooting for him, were raptly attentive when he turned to face them and began to speak, his voice ringing loud and clear, every word enunciated. "I was married for 70 wonderful years to my wife Shirley, from 1948 to 2018. This is my advice about how to have a long and happy marriage." He paused for dramatic effect. "DO NOT FALL! But if you do," he paused again, surveying his audience, "pick each other up and support each other with thousands of kisses." He beamed, and the guests wiped tears from their eyes, the air thick with love.

My parents, Sydney and Shirley, met for the first time in the spring of 1941. They were students in the same Hebrew class at James Monroe High School in the Bronx, and it was the last semester of their senior year. Talk of impending war permeated the high school hallways. They had both skipped a grade in junior high school and were younger than their classmates. My mother, trying not to

be noticed, gravitated toward sitting in the back row with her good friend Evie. Although Syd tended to sit up front, they all managed to chitchat about shared interests and about their plans for college – City College for him, Hunter College for Shirley and Evie.

Evie and my mother liked my dad because he was easy to talk to, and as both of them told me later, it didn't hurt that he had a

thick crop of curly light brown hair and unusually light green eyes. My father's mother, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, often proudly declared, "My son Sydney—he looks like a *hech-tor* from the Hollywood movies."

One day toward the end of the semester, the teacher, formally dressed in a suit and tie, strode to the back of the class and sternly announced, "Mr. Brody, you are in serious danger of failing this class unless you can turn in the final paper.

You have missed the last 2 assignments." My mother and her friend Evie struggled to suppress their nervous giggles. Syd nodded to show he understood.

When the class was dismissed, the girls approached my dad. "So, Syd, are you going to write the final paper?" He shook his head and shrugged "Nope, not important." The truth was he didn't feel capable of writing the paper because he had no previous formal training in Hebrew. However, a lack of training didn't stop my mother, her friend Evie, or even Arthur Fazzini, a non-Jewish



My mother and her best friend Evie in high school.
1941

classmate who later re-invented himself as Art Fleming, the first long-time host of Jeopardy, from excelling in the class.

The two girls hatched a plot. They decided to write the paper for him and turn it in under his name, saving him from failure. It was a bit risky, because if he uncharacteristically turned in a paper himself, the teacher would question why he received two papers written by Syd, but they gambled and took the chance. As Evie and Shirley anticipated, when the teacher called each student to retrieve their graded papers, Syd's name was called only once. When he heard his name, he was startled. Perhaps the teacher planned only to berate him again? To his amazement, the teacher handed him a paper and grudgingly said, "Good work, Brody." Syd turned the "A" paper over in his hands, looking for clues as to where the paper may have come from. He was completely bewildered by the existence of this paper that bore his name.

Later the two girls approached him and confessed what they had done. Syd was amazed and grateful, writing in both girls' yearbook the same sentiment: "If my face by chance be scanned in future years, I hope that my gratitude and admiration for you will show itself. I will never forget that book report. No—it wasn't just the mark (an A!)—it was the way you went about it. It was remarkable! My gratitude again, with the hope that many happy successes will come your way."

It was not until five years later that my parents met again, this time in a post-War neighborhood dance sponsored by the Jewish Federation. In a large room bordered by tables laden with cookies and punch, surrounded by the jubilant brass sounds of Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller, my father recognized my mother in the crowd, a blond Ingrid Bergman look-alike

(but Jewish!) with a welcoming smile.

My father followed my mother around for a bit, too nervous to approach her. When he finally worked up the courage to talk to her, he quickly blurted out, "Remember me?" silently berating himself for not saying something sophisticated. Of course she remembered him. Not only had she liked him so much in high school that she had ghostwritten a paper for him, but she had a photographic memory. Even at the end of her life, when dementia robbed her of any semblance of rationality and everyone tiptoed around her dark angry moods, she could remember details from the past that others had long forgotten.

That night my parents danced and caught up on the previous five years. He told her he had been stationed at several Air Force bases in Texas, his first time living anywhere other than the Bronx. He was now back home, enrolled in City College, focusing on what his future might look like. What he *didn't* tell her was that he had befriended a pretty non-Jewish girl from Amarillo he had met at a USO dance, learning how to play bridge on the lawn of her sprawling Texas ranch, but that Texas was awfully far from New York and his orthodox Jewish parents would never have welcomed her.

My mother told him she was enrolled at Hunter, working part-time as an assistant to Dorothy Norman, a well-known photographer, writer, and patron of the arts. What she *didn't* tell him was that she had corresponded with a soldier whose name she was given by the Jewish Federation, matched because of their shared birthdates. She was so enraptured with him that she cajoled her mother into giving her permission to scandalously visit him in faraway Louisiana, only to be later ghosted by him. Her friends and family were not allowed to refer to him

after that; his name was synonymous with evil.

What she saved up for telling him later, like a precious jewel brought out to dazzle and impress on special occasions, was that recently, the even then famous Georgia O'Keefe had shown up at Dorothy Norman's office, dressed in her signature black, and had paused for a moment at my mother's desk, studying her face. "You know your eyes and hair match. They are both such a lovely gold color—I'd love to

paint your portrait." My mother had been startled, muttering an awkward "thanks," and treasured the encounter throughout her life, even though no portrait ever came of it.

When the dance ended, my parents parted from their friends and went to a nearby nightclub, oblivious to the late hour. When my mother arrived home past 1 AM, her mother was frantic. "Where were you? I was getting ready to call the police!" Her anger faded as she recognized my mother's joy. My parents were inseparable after that, seeing each other several times a week for the next year, dancing their way through New York's post-War explosion of art, theatre, and nightclubs.

When my mother sent my father the upbeat, jazzy, and popular Andrews Sisters tune, "Put that Ring on My Finger", she signaled how serious she was about their relationship. But

some of my father's older siblings thought he was too young to settle down, especially his sister Jean, 12 years his senior.

Jean's husband Ben, 6 years older than Jean, whispered conspiratorially, "You don't have to get married to have sex, you know", even though he and Jean had married young and my Dad's twin sister Rosemary had already gotten married. My father thought perhaps Ben might be right — after all, Ben had taken good care of him in the past, rushing him



*The author's parents, Sydney and Shirley, at their wedding
1949*

to the hospital when he gashed his forehead climbing the stoop at age 6. Maybe 22 really was too young to get married. He decided to listen to Ben's advice and broke up with my mother.

After a week or two of missing her, my father decided he had waited long enough. He showed up at her apartment at 9 AM, taking the worn stairs two at a time to her family's third story walk-up, and banged on the door, attracting the neighbors' attention. My grandmother, not fully dressed in her roomy housecoat, cautiously looked out of the peephole to see who was there. "Can you let me in?" he cried. "I want to marry your daughter!" She opened the door, my mother at her heels, and my father proposed. My mother said yes on the spot. ♦

The Stacking Doll

BY ELIZABETH ROZAN

She sits cross-legged on the crowded bed,
a concentrated ball of energy.
Her hands work the bubbles of the matryoshka doll:
opening, opening, opening,
twisting the circular plywood to find the littlest one.
That's who she can relate to,
as she feels abandoned, rejected, unloved,
when the Moon's encircling arms are hidden.
Her small hands work this system over and over.
She puts the dolls back together again,
closing, closing, closing,
one into the other, tightly twisting the top one shut
and lining up the painted flowers just so, until
she feels safe, protected,
back in the arms of the Mother.



CONTRIBUTORS



MOUNA MALOOF ANDERSON, a long-time resident of Lexington, spent her early childhood in Zahle, Lebanon. “The General” is a memoir-based story written as a legacy gift to her children.



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has published professional articles and three books: *Gender, Emotion and the Family*, *Daughters of Kings*, and *The Bouncing Worry Ball*.



GRACE CHU grew up with a deep love of nature which became a love of photographing birds. A retired engineer, she now chases snowy owls in the winter and is always searching for new birds to photograph.

HELEN LUTTON COHEN began watercolor painting upon retirement as minister of First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, which she served from 1980-2002.



Poetry came late to **JOHN EHRENFELD**. An MIT-trained chemical engineer, he returned to



teach there after working in the environmental field for many years. Now in his nineties, he researches and has written about an environment that is flourishing rather than just being sustained in *The Right Way to Flourish: Reconnecting with the Real World*, available on Amazon, or visit johnehrenfeld.com

HELEN EPSTEIN began working as a journalist



at the age of 20 during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. She wrote her first book *Children of the Holocaust* when she was 29 and has since published ten books of non-fiction, most recently *Getting Through It: My Year of Cancer During Covid*. She was an NYU journalism professor and, for the past 20 years, a guest lecturer.

IRENE HANNIGAN, a retired educator, enjoys writing and sketching. She



has recently been exploring poetry. Her book, *Write On! How to Make Writing a Pleasurable Pastime*, is available on Amazon.

ANNE JOHNSTONE has been making art since



she could scribble as a way to make sense of her world. She studied art and art history and has taken art courses at various Boston art schools.



While living eight years in Egypt, NANCY KOUCHOUK wrote and edited at American University and Cairo American College. Her past work colors her poetry.

NICOLE MORDECAI is a member of the Photography Guild at LexArt, where she teaches photography and photo editing. She creates art photography, often using special effects to create otherworldly images. For more details, visit her website at CreateWithPhotos.com.



DR. ANITA MYER maintained an office in Lexington center as a neurofeedback psychologist for many years. A former English teacher, she continues to enjoy a creative writing group with her Lexington friends. She has previously written columns for the Lexington newspaper.

After 54 years, DR. DINESH PATEL retired as an arthroscopic surgeon from MGH where he was department chief. He has lived in Lexington for 46 years and is a long-time Town Meeting member.



JAYANTHI RANGAN has taught science and breathed it all her life. Her short stories have appeared in many publications including *Bookends Review*, *Twisted Vine Literary Journal* and *Corner Club Press*. Her poetry is mostly topical and has appeared in *Poet's Choice* and anthologies.



ELIZABETH ROZAN has lived in Lexington since 1988. Having recently retired from a career with various public schools, she works with symbols and metaphors in both writing and the visual arts.



PAM SMITH spent 42 years as a teacher and administrator in a variety of elementary schools. Now retired, she has followed her other passion, and become a collage artist.



RUIMIN WENG worked in the conference business before retirement. He is an amateur photographer mostly in landscape and nature photography. ♦



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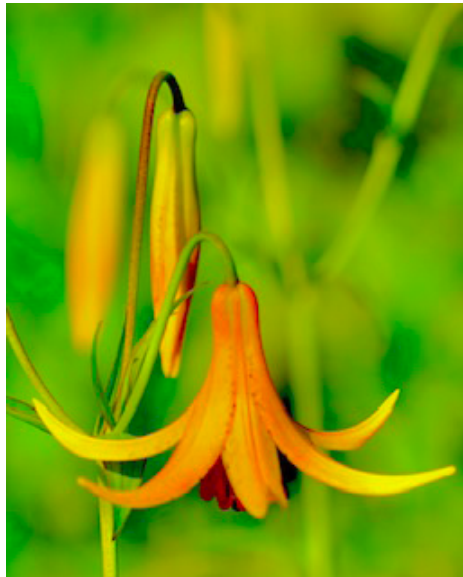
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