

# ESCOM Journal

November/December 2020



*Emeritus Students  
College of Marin*

*Lifelong Learning*

*Lifelong Doing*

*Lifelong Friendships*

*Photo: Laura Milholland*

## Embracing Transitions as Opportunities

As 2020 moves toward 2021, I hope that you are finding positive insights during the pandemic crisis. Myself, I often think about "Where will I be when this is all over?". And, equally important: "Who will I be then?" Have these months of quarantine impacted how you see yourself, how you give meaning to your life? When feeling less resilient in difficult times, I try to remember the importance of focusing on courage, patience, and gratitude.

In this pandemic quarantine period, there is potential for a time-out to reassess our identity and our direction as individuals and as a community. Yet, even in a crisis we find opportunities to emerge stronger and wiser. As author Annie Dillard has written, "How we spend our days is how we

spend our lives". Right now let's make each day count. Here's a way.

The ESCOM Council is seeking members to join us in our service to ESCOM and Community Education. The Council manages all aspects of ESCOM from finance and curriculum to general meetings, Author's Series, publications, and many events of significance to members and older adults in Marin. Our goal is to provide opportunities for lifelong learning and social interaction.

Re-committing to causes that are important by re-engaging with groups who share my values and by contributing to the lives of others gives a sense of purpose and meaning. You won't be surprised to hear that ESCOM has

provided that needed foundation and comfort that keeps me and many others on a "path with heart." I hope that perhaps you may feel the same.

There has never been a better time to come onboard and to share your skills, experience and vitality with the ESCOM Council. We need you. We welcome all backgrounds and diversity is encouraged. And we need your ideas and energy. Your contributions could well be the perfect resource to help us thrive and grow.

As we move on during challenging times, please let ESCOM help you find purpose and hope in the future. Let's talk! Contact me at Luanne.Mullin@ [comcast.net](mailto:Luanne.Mullin@comcast.net).

-- Luanne Mullin, ESCOM President

Laura Milholland



### Ode to the Tomato

oh you who are the pulsing  
heart of the garden  
your vine holding you  
perfectly positioned  
balanced in the sun  
your skin shiny and taut  
you are grace itself  
a ballet dancer on opening night  
your vine so deeply green  
that its roots tremble  
a gift of gratitude  
to the divinity of the garden.  
touch it, touch it! OH JOY

and then you begin to  
sing — bursting with life  
little white flowers first,  
like kisses — oh you sweet thing  
you bring the blood of the heart  
of the queen to fruition  
to merge with herbs and spices  
to be sauce and soup and salad  
and be eaten by me, this minute,  
NOW, in all your grace and glory

your warm flesh tastes  
like life itself  
I bite into you and swoon  
juice drips down my arm  
and into the happy soil

true heitz

### The Flying Burrito

Before the improv show at Fort Mason my friend Kris and I planned to eat dinner at the “Food Truck Crush,” 20 or so food trucks, serving delicious and diverse ethnic fare, in the Fort Mason parking lot. Picnic tables and benches were set up on the periphery for the diners.

The Crush typically attracts stylishly dressed 20 to 30-year olds, looking to have a tasty and budget friendly dinner, before setting out to the theater, dance club, movie or wherever twenty to thirty year olds go on a weekend night in San Francisco.

Kris and I, old enough to be their parents or grandparents, were dressed in down parkas, mom jeans and sensible shoes. Hardly hip but totally appropriate for the blustery city winds that whip around Fort Mason at night.

After a quick tour of the trucks, garlic and curry fumes saturating our practical ski outfits, we decided on giant burritos.

As we carried our paper plate bending, burritos, to the crowded dining area we searched for a place to sit. Finally, a table of six millennials, trendily dressed in lots of black lace and leather, waved us over and scooted around so we could plop down on the end of their picnic bench. After a polite greeting they continued their animated conversation. I noticed that their cell phones were remarkably out of sight.

Kris and I were about one pound into our two-pound burritos when we decided to surgically slice them open and eat their innards. No sooner had I had mine filleted carnitas, sour cream, guacamole, lettuce, and beans, spread over the entire paper plate, the biggest wind gust of the night slid underneath the plate, carried it ten inches straight up in the air, tilted it perfectly toward the face of the dark haired beauty seated directly across from me and propelled it straight into her face.

Remarkably, as I was crying out, “Oh no, oh no,” her friends were searching wildly for their cell phones. As I jumped up and ran to get napkins and water, they were excitedly taking pictures, and videos.

Returning to the table 2 minutes later I found Kris picking lettuce out of the girl’s waist length hair, and wiping sour cream off her leather coat. Her friends were now sending the pictures and videos to the entire world who missed the in-person excitement of the old lady flinging the gigantic burrito all over their friend.

Kris and I cleaned up the victim as best we could. I gave her my name and phone number and begged her to send me the bill from the cleaners. She was so kind, assuring me that she wasn’t upset, even though she smelled like a taqueria and looked like a wet burrito, and thanked us for helping her clean up while her friends took pictures. For a quick second I considered asking them to send one of the pictures to me but the insensitivity of the request might have exceeded my future amusement. Or, maybe not.

Later, at the improv show, the troupe asked for a suggestion for a movie title. Kris yelled, “The Flying Burrito”. And, what do you know, we saw it performed.

It was nothing like the movie we starred in earlier that evening.

-- Shelley Friedman

## Air Brakes

When my middle daughter Sally was born, I figured it was time to stop working under the table for cheapo contractors and make some real money. So I gathered up the tuition and went to the Falcon Truck School in Corte Madera. I was going to drive big rigs.

It was lots of fun and made me think I was doing something contributive, while my wife was recovering from a C-section gone bad (popped staples), and caring for a newborn, in addition to our five-year old. But I think she really wanted me out of the house.

Anyway, for a month I got to drive a Peterbilt Conventional that looked like a giant Rolls Royce, and a Freightliner Cabover, that looked like an oversized refrigerator rolling down the road, its thirteen speed manual transmission with a hi-lo range and an over-under splitter providing no small part of the entertainment. At the end of the month I not only knew how to adjust the brakes on a 72,000 pound semi and drive it forwards *and* backwards, I knew all the right swearwords, but *also* how to shut down a runaway diesel motor by pulling over, popping the hood and stabbing the fuel filter with a screwdriver, letting air into the fuel line and starving the engine. My license said Class A Commercial, M2, and I was ready to be a hero.

Only after I completed the course did I find the school's "employment assistance" consisted of advice to go over to Oakland, and find a job paying six dollars an hour for a year, in order to gain experience. This was 1985, but even then, *six dollars*? I tried for a few weeks to find something, but the trucking companies sneered at my enthusiasm. I talked to my wife. She said I better go back to my old job. I got right back into lockstep.

My friend Bob from Lompoc who drove gasoline tankers on a weekly rotating shift: day, swing, grave (I would never consider it), said I ought to hang onto the license, take the physical every two years, never know when I might be able to use it. Bob's the real deal; wound up diving tankers for 28 years, so I did what he said. Never did drive a big truck again, though.

It was a pain. The alcohol limit is half that of a regular license and the points are one and a half times, though I entertained a feeling that I was holding myself to a better standard.

For my seventieth birthday, DMV sent the renewal notice. I thought I might just let it go, take the written to drive a simple car and leave it at that. Then I thought how hard it was to get. I'd pay for the physical, the eye test, and the urine test, take the multiple written tests, all four: Vehicle Code, Class A, Airbrakes, Combination Vehicle. *Then* I thought how I was just being an egotistical old fart. Back and forth. So, finally I went to Kaiser, passed the medical exam, then studied for the



Laura Milholland

## Birding

While walking in the woodland  
A throaty robin's song I heard  
Looking up to seek its source  
I spied an entirely different bird  
Sitting on an old oak limb  
Amongst the leafy canopy  
I saw a flash of brilliant red  
like sunrise on a smoky dawn  
It swiftly darted out of sight  
Into foliage green and bright  
As if to set fire to the leaves  
A scarlet tanager I believe  
A treasured gift for me to see  
As I looked up in an old oak tree

-- Carol Allen

written. Soon as I started reading I knew I'd forgotten most of it. I put in hours and finally time was running out. So I went to the DMV. I was ready.

Got there, no appointment, heard there was an hour and a half wait, and got my little ticket stub. DMV is the great equalizer, doesn't matter what you drive or what you wear, you're going to wait. I just sat there next to a Vietnamese guy who might've been a machinist or who knows and two old guys making comments about the place. We tried to make the most of it, stay positive. I was worried about the test and needed to stay on my game. I got called to window #8 to present my birth certificate, application, and proof of residence. As the clerk asked for each document I was ON IT, excited. I told the clerk how much fun I thought it might be, working with all the folks that came in every day. She just gave me a withering stare. When I went to pay the fees I asked if an ATM card was ok. She smiled with what seemed like satisfaction and said, "no. Cash or credit card only." I drew out my credit card and her face fell a bit.

I went to the other side of the room, took the test and finally victorious, passed with a high score.

-- Mike Holland



## R.I.P. RBG

She  
let the tide carry her  
into the lagoon where  
her offspring were born,  
long, long after those offspring  
had borne offspring of their own.

She knew that in time, the tides would depart  
without her, leave her to the mud and, without the water's  
support, a slow death under her own crushing weight. The air  
passing through her sinuses, resonates inside the bone of her  
great head, disturbing the water with waves of mortal distress.

Kinfolk

forgo food, nudge their young out of play to gather at the lagoon  
as brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and mothers, sleek and shiny

black backs with dorsal fins rising to the sun.

Flukes, pectoral paddles labor in the shallows to stay afloat

and as close to her for as long as possible, until

bellies scrape bottom and it is time to leave.

only to return with the next high tide,

and the one after that, until

gravity finally wins

and there is no longer

any reason to return.

Yet, they do,

one more time, before turning away

for the last time, then returning their hunger back to the sea

and the thousands of miles they would swim without her.

-- Denize Springer



Laura Milholland

## MEMBER NEWS

### New poetry chapbook from ESCOM member

If you've ever taken a creative writing or conversational French class with College of Marin continuing education, you may know Dotty LeMieux.

The ESCOM member, perhaps best known as a political consultant and Democratic Party activist, honed her poetry skills in Jackie Kudler's *Tales Told From Memory* and Thomas Centolella's Master Poetry classes. And all her hard work is about to pay off with the publication of her poetry chapbook, *Henceforth I ask not Good Fortune* from Finishing Line Press.

The collection contains pieces of life observed in and around Marin County, including the homeless on our streets and the inside of hospitals and eateries, from San Rafael Joe's and St. Vincent's Dining Room.

The book is currently in presales, which means you may order now for a December delivery date in time for Holiday giving. To order the book

visit: <https://www.finishinglinepress.com/product/henceforth-i-ask-not-good-fortune-by-dotty-e-lemieux/>

Congrats Dotty!

### **Cry Contrapuntal**

Cry for this decimation  
of humanity

a little darker, this day

and the few before it

cry for your loved ones

and those who grieve

a decision to depart

without permission

cry for the unknown

yet known to others

your mother and daughter

are lost in galaxies of ash

cry for this planet

for the blessed gift

of life

in search of any trace

you might have left  
behind,

cry for selfish thoughts

that eat at your soul

my own world distant

yet ethereally connected

cry for laughter

that allows escape

by words and visions

tastes and decadence

cry rain, sun, wind

and stars

a lust for living to see

what simple desires

humanity shares

cry for the wild of

nature as all creatures

fight to thrive

around this thunderstruck  
globe,

cry for the sweetness

of hope, the bitter bite

of sorrow

tomato salad with shallots

and sherry vinegar,

cry love and passion

for someone to embrace

one from your cookbook

to share with friends

cry every prayer and

cry gratitude

on Saturday night, it

brought you to our table

each juicy bite balanced

with exotic kabobs, giggles

and tears as we remembered

your insane loveliness

cry for your ability

to cry, to be unburdened

to wash away the pain ....

-- Margie Heckleman



*Laura Miholland*

### **HAIKU**

#### **Remembering Dave**

Watching Letterman

While drinking mugs of hot milk

Two old cats in bed

#### **Georgio Story**

The 30's flyer,

Balbo, also grandma's cat,

She fed him meatballs

#### **Sounds in the Night**

Indian Valley.

Coyotes howl. Open door.

One-eyed cat races in.

-- Ellen Breazeale

## Cherished Gifts

I don't *object* to objects *per se*. In fact, I'm sentimental about way too many of them. For example, I still have the holiday ornaments we made when we were young. I have many gifts of jewelry I seldom wear, and keep cards I look at once a year. I cherish the *memory* of the object more than the object itself. Another star of cherished objects lives in my memory, and I love her for it. She is a black doll. This is her story, I know it because it's true.

My mother told me that before we moved to the suburbs, when I was a toddler, I would visit with the neighbors and come home with lipstick prints on the top of my blonde head where the more demonstratively affectionate of them would kiss me. Most of the houses were duplexes, and were lived in by our friends, mostly black families, and a few Jewish ones.

Our downstairs neighbors in the old neighborhood had a daughter named Grace. She was a beauty, teen-aged with creamy coffee-colored skin and huge eyes. Grace was deaf and my mother showed me how to look at Grace when I spoke so that she could read my lips. She advised me not to exaggerate, but to pronounce words distinctly. My gift was Grace's smile.

Grace's father, I learned later was called Danny. When I heard Grace's mother calling Danny, I thought she was saying "Daddy," and that "Daddy" was his name. "Daddy" was white and Grace's mother, generous and dark-skinned, laughed so hard her scarfed head shook when she heard me. She hugged me close to her apron that smelled like cookies.

I had a single-row box of Crayola crayons. Learning the names of the colors was a challenge. All light colors were designated "yellow," with "green" reserved for all the dark colors. My toddler friend from next-door down-stairs, Edna, was at our house and my mother heard me tell Edna she was "gween" and that I was "ellow." Couldn't fool me. I guess I was pretty sophisticated. Edna didn't seem to mind, she knew "gween" was my favorite color.

By the time I was four, we were in the 'burbs. One day I saw my mother take a big box down from a cupboard in the kitchen where she put things she didn't want me to reach. The box appeared huge, almost my height. She took it to her bedroom and closed the door. When she came out she asked me to help set the table. We were having a holiday party. She had decorations that symbolized Thanksgiving and Chanukah and celebrated my birthday. All my cousins came and brought presents. There was ice-cream and cake.

My mother brought out the big box. It was pastel-colored cardboard with a cellophane window on one side. I couldn't see clearly through the cellophane until my mother put the box down on the floor. I sat down too. I couldn't believe

Laura Harrison



what I saw. It was a doll, a beautiful big girl doll, not a baby doll like others I had, not like Raggedy Ann, with whom I slept. *This* doll had long eyelashes, her eyes were brown like mine and opened and closed. Her features were perfect. She had shiny white socks and Mary-Jane shoes. Her hair was short and curly. Her arms and legs moved back and forth when I stood behind her and gently nudged her along. She was a doll to be friends with, not a baby who needed a bottle and a diaper. Everything about her was amazing, but in retrospect, her *most* amazing attribute was that she was Black, although at the time I didn't give her color a thought.

Who gave her to me? My mother claimed *she* didn't know. Later, I imagined it could have been sent by my uncle. He came back from the war around that time, so the two events somehow aligned themselves. But, why would he send a *Black* doll in particular? Did he intend a specific significance? With further hindsight, I think it's far more likely it was a gift from one or another of our former neighbors to remind me: *Don't forget us.*

The Black doll was cherished as a superstar during my childhood, but the memory of her—of Grace and her mother, of "Daddy" and Edna—is far more cherished than the actual doll.

-- Rosalie Marcovecchio



### The Un-Birthday Birthday Party

The time was World War II and my Uncle Red, married to my mother's youngest sister Mollie, was about to be inducted, so he joined the Seabees. He was sent immediately to Oahu in the Pacific, where he headed a crew building runways for the planes off to battle.

Aunt Mollie came to live with us for a while. She was a heavy smoker, as was my father, and we lived in a miasma of smoke during her visit. Finally she left for the West Coast to get a job in the shipyards.

Leaving behind was Uncle Red's sister Agnes, who was disliked by everyone who knew her. She was a thoroughly unpleasant person. However, she had no other family and my mother felt very sorry for her. Mother decided to have a birthday party for her. My mother called everyone she knew, but got 100% negative responses. They could not get a baby sitter, they had a doctor's appointment, they planned to have a broken leg, an anxiety attack, or any handy excuse why they could not come to a birthday party for Agnes.

Finally, my mother insisted that her older sister Betty attend, demanded that her daughter Phyllis take time off from work to attend and, including myself, mother and Agnes made a total of five, not a bad number for a birthday party. Mother set a beautiful table, the food was delicious and it was a lovely afternoon.

Aunt Mollie had sent me an elegant pair of figurines, which sit proudly in my breakfront today, and to Agnes two hand-made rugs. Mollie came back home, but died shortly after that.

Several weeks later I received a call from Agnes. She asked me whether I would like to have the rugs Mollie had sent her. I said that I did not need to have the rugs to remember Mollie. I never found out what happened to the rugs.

- Iris Tandler



### Thanksgiving

Of all the moments  
a mother imagines  
as new hands, another heart  
take shape within her,  
the possibility of one day  
polishing old silver together  
would not be one of them.

But today was every good, gathered  
at the kitchen sink, a jumble  
of forks and knives, moments  
and lives and nothing at all  
that needed to be solved. Just this  
easy rite of burnishing hope,  
held and handed-down.

-- Vicki Pedersen



Laura Harrison

## This Is When We Get To Be Alive

Like many Marinites, we've spent these Covid evenings watching British crime dramas with the subtitles on, waiting for the virus to go away and the state to stop being on fire.

It's been a long haul. We have been stoic and dutiful, and at present very lucky (knowing it could change in a moment, that luck).

We've worked our way through various DCIs and DSs at the nick (British cop-talk, mind you), and a raft of familiar-looking actors who wend their way from one series to another. When we've had enough of Helen Mirren et al., we tuck into a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel turned into a miniseries.

By now we've racked up a few iterations of Dickens, the Bronte sisters, and Jane Austen. And for ancillary edification – and to keep me from wasting afternoons watching cable news – I read complementary titles. Sometimes the novel in question, sometimes a nonfiction historical account of the time period.

Right now I'm reading a novel imagining the downstairs lives of the servants in the Bennett household – that frivolous, frothy, estrogen-enhanced family from Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." You know, the one with five irrepressible daughters who, as women, cannot inherit their father's estate, and the aloof yet dreamy Mr. Darcy who will pretty much save everything.

But in this book, the template of Elizabeth Bennett's search for love is but a backdrop to the equally intense longing done by a particular servant girl in the same household. A girl who has to sweep ashes and empty chamber pots and suffer chilblains and go out in the rain in a muslin dress to get color-coordinated shoe roses for the Bennett daughters the day of a ball.

In the 1800s, the main goal for a family was to get its daughters married off, and married well.

So there is much talk of hair curling irons, the washing of petticoats, the sewing of dresses, and the ordering of gowns. Managing the clothing for five young women – and their mother – in an era before washing machines and Tide Pods and the dry cleaner's is almost unthinkable.

Occasionally a character will don a pelisse (long-sleeved ladies jacket) to go out in the cold. And the servant girl's pelisse, of course, is a threadbare cast-off that hardly keeps her warm, and does not protect her from flying mud as a horse-drawn coach clatters by on an inclement afternoon.

Nevertheless, one character or another is often wearing or reaching for a pelisse, as they worry their way toward matrimony. And at some point I thought, "Don't sweat it, ladies. You're dead now. That was your time, and it's over.

Harvey Abernathy



Nobody wears a pelisse anymore, women can support themselves, and there are no invitations or unsolicited proposals to worry about. All that angst is behind you." It's comforting, in a way, to know that these (albeit fictional) characters' anxieties are a thing of the past.

And that led me to the depressing realization that THIS, right now, is OUR time. This emotionally draining, don't-leave-the-house, don't-cut-your-hair, don't-eat-in-a-restaurant time. No matter if we've resorted to sweat pants or are still dressing well . . . our present "fashion" will be gone with the pelisse and the reticule and the knee breeches before we know it. And, just like that, OUR time will be over too.

It seems we've been on "pause" for so long that we've accepted – gratefully, if we haven't been hit by Covid – this protracted period of waiting. But I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of wearing t-shirts and elastic waist pants and throwing out desiccated tubes of unworn lipstick and not bothering to change table linens and candle colors because I can't have dinner guests anyway.

This is our time. And we don't get another one.

All our current stuff – our electric cars and our memory foam mattresses and our Smart watches and oat milk and tattoos – will just be time-capsule fodder for future humans to read about and puzzle over.

"There, there, you silly 21<sup>st</sup> century humans. Not to worry! The Covid, the cancer, the climate change . . . all things of the past. Your time is over."

Gulp.

But until that day, I am hereby protesting the inertia of our worrisome time. I want to work without fear. I want to put on a pelisse and go to a movie, visit a museum, travel. I want to dance in my shoe roses alongside the others who are here with me.

Now.

-- Elaine Bultman



## Harvest Time

Stop

Still

Green apples in the trees

gathered on the branch

bunched like cherries

but a different concept

that weren't split off

not regarded as redundant

or a bad influence on growth

the branch so bent by the weight

but it can take it

effortlessly but full of pride

and worms, they call it organic

and you just know: one in every apple

and never all in one

core as meeting point

The gloss of the peel as if polished

with owl down and sacred wax

you can almost see yourself

no glasses though, they would only

reflect back into the apple recursively

as an endless Escher

The wind that elsewhere moves the mill

plays here with the leaves and also brings

the hummingbird along although it can

hover in place by itself

like a wind-up butterfly but then

so fast you mostly hear the wings

prrrrr and it's gone

Stop

Still

The nectar extracted as the bee on the way

to its hexagonal honey in the comb

like little yellow Dutch clogs

but without windmills, the pollen

heavy on its tiny feet

laden with purity as powder

- form is just an appearance

that you don't always get to choose

like a halloween costume

if that's really your thing

the one sees the orange of the pumpkins

the other the spiders as big as

the skeletons whose bones

stick out of the ground and

only the word bony hovers

like the hummingbird so close

to its trumpeting flower

Stop

Still

My little girl counts the tiny golden clogs,

her precious treasure, counting how often

the bee has had to fly for her

before she one by one

and so carefully lays them on her tongue

to let the spring fall

apart before winter



Laura Harrison

the power the warmth of the sun

counters it until

The beginning of a new year

will bring her a new spring

Stop

Still

Because for now the year is not gone yet

at the end we want to slow it down

like our step by step

make a mark on the spot

lost in thought

ecstatic exalted extension

essential to evolution, to essence,

the awareness of ourselves in relation

to the world - for growth and for progress

And that's why we pick our own apples

- Anouk Bekker

### The Thunder Storm

The storm silhouettes bold haunting trees,  
While candles flicker in cold windows light.  
With stark precision,  
The motion of fallen leaves  
Forces autumns wet lips against paned glass.  
Coldness explodes  
Into a thunderous silver-bladed knife as  
The tumbling shift of the earth  
Lifts the ocean away from itself  
Slamming waves into gritty sand.  
Over and over my squinting eyes  
Sweep heavens vindication  
Looking always into expletive shadows.  
The light and the wind  
Become wanting lovers and  
the earth ignites once again  
in its unadulterated release.

— Nora Jean Monfredini

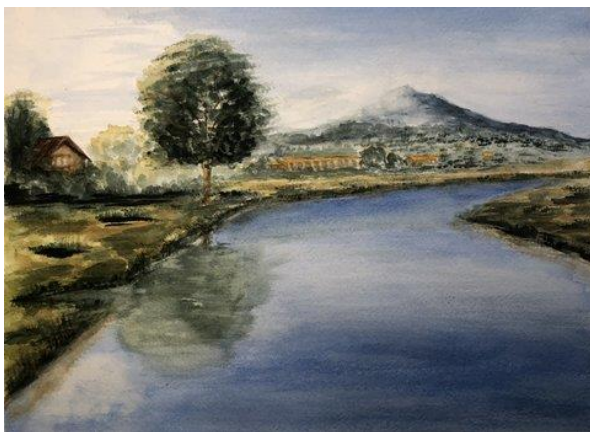
Laura Milholland



### What If

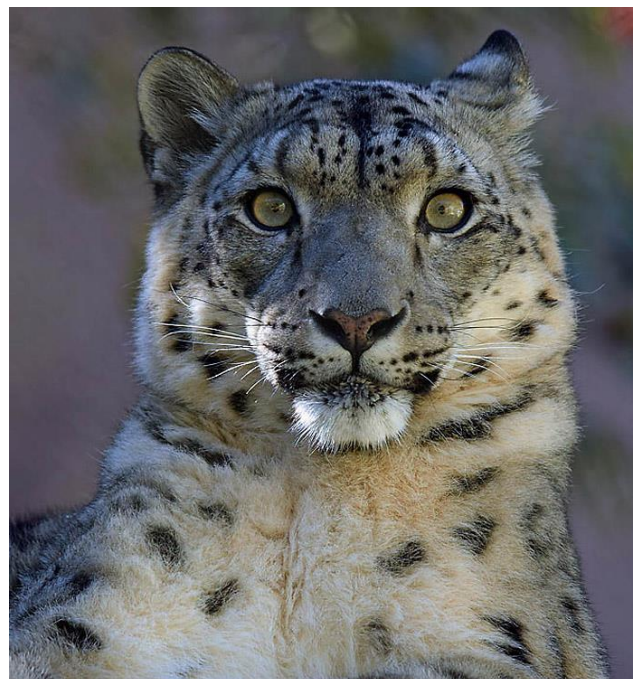
What if wonder was traded like coins  
but instead of coins, stars were used  
and what if the stars were each a different color  
and each color meant a different gift of the spirit  
what if you could trade a deep green patience star  
for a sky blue understanding star  
and, when used  
each star would turn into a prayer  
and float into the heavens?  
What if....

-- Louise Potter Yost



*Correction: This painting, which appeared in the Sept/Oct issue of The Journal, was painted by Beverly Windle (not Beverly Wright). Apologies.*

Laura Milholland



## MEMOIR

### Not a Communist

"But I never joined the Party," exclaimed Marissa, our Russian tour guide, shaking her curly hair from side to side in a decisive manner.

She was explaining what her life had been like, being raised under the Communist regime. We were touring the magnificent Church on the Spilled Blood in St. Petersburg, a Russian-styled structure with its multi-colored onion domes, cupolas and golden turrets adorning the outside. The Church had been built by Emperor Alexander III on the spot where his father, Alexander the II, was assassinated in 1881. We were astonished by the 23,000 square feet of intricate mosaics showing the life of Christ covering a vast area of the exterior, as well as the arched gables and carved marble columns resting on grey Serdobol granite. The bell tower, crowned with a golden cupola, stood high above the domes covered with sheets of gilded brass. The façade also contained twenty enormous slabs of dark red granite, depicting an account of the events that marked the reign of Alexander II.

The interior of the church stunned me with its profusion of Italian marble. Many semiprecious stones surrounded the mosaics, which covered every inch of the floors and ceilings, again depicting scenes from the life of Christ. Everywhere we looked, we could see a unique scene designed by master craftsmen. Marissa told us that these mosaic decorations were created by a group of artists consisting of over 25 people. It was all so opulent and striking that it took my breath away.

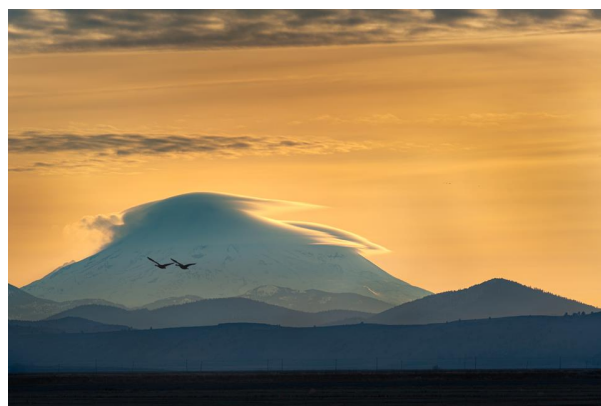
"It was fortunate that this beautiful church was saved," said Marissa. "Although it closed down for a number of years, it was not destroyed during World War II, when Leningrad was heavily bombed. When I was a child, many of the churches were converted to other uses under Stalin. No one was allowed to go to church to worship. The church nearest my house was turned into a skating rink, where we used to go on the weekends to ice skate. A few blocks away, another church became a public swimming pool."

"Did anyone defy the ban on worship?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Some of the elders met secretly in neighborhoods over the years, but couldn't do it openly. Before that, churches were a very important part of Russian life. And now there is a resurgence of religion, and we are grateful that many of the churches are intact."

"Did most people become Communists?" asked Jim.

Shasta Cranes, Harvey Abernethy



"Yes. My mother and mother-in-law both became Party members. In school we students were forced to study "scientific atheism" and were strongly encouraged to join the Party, but I didn't. You had to be careful not to speak out against the rulers, but if you were quiet, you could observe and make up your own mind."

"What about your children?"

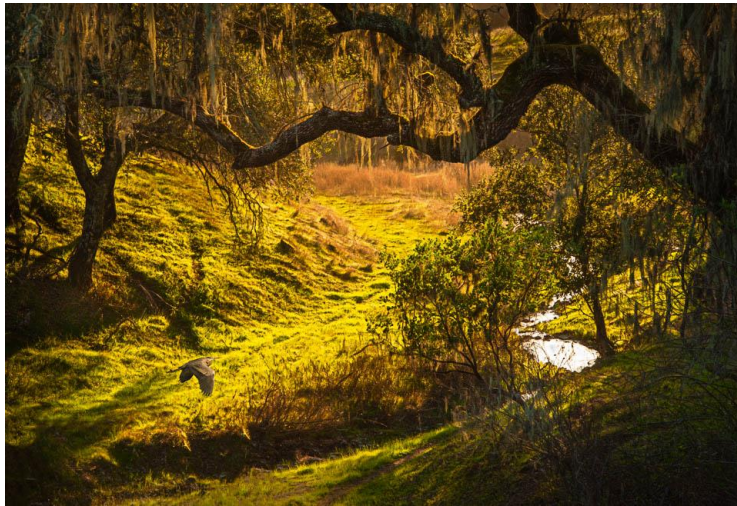
"My daughter is free to speak her mind now, and she does. But let me tell you a little story. When she was born, it never occurred to my husband and me to have her baptized, because we'd never learned about baptism. But the older generation remembered, and my mother-in-law, despite being a Communist, took my child and had her baptized secretly. I didn't even know it for a long time."

We were all listening intently, and were surprised at this revelation. Marissa was the most open of all the guides we'd been with, and seemed to want to share her history with us. She had not only shown us a huge variety of monuments and palaces, but was happy to answer any questions we had, and gave us her opinion on many issues. Other guides had been abrupt and one had ignored our questions, wanting only to direct us to the specific destinations we had signed up to visit. At passport control, when entering Russia, my female agent was non-smiling and unfriendly. She shouted at me because I had forgotten to take off my sunglasses.

Marissa was different. She spoke English perfectly, smiled a lot, and also had a sense of humor. After accompanying us on three different tours of St. Petersburg, she wanted us to learn a few words of Russian, despite the fact that we struggled with the Cyrillic language. Finally she was able to teach us two phrases: "thank you" sounded like "spo-see-ba"; and "I love you" sounded like "yellow-blue-bus." And with that smattering of language, and a lot better understanding of Russia and a bit of its history, we thanked her and bid her farewell.

-- Judy Storey Edgar





Harvey Abernathy

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