

# Village Voices

## In Our Own Words

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### GOING BACK—BERLIN by Gaby Kopelman

*Do you ever go back?* people ask.

Back? Back to where, and to when? Time and place are inextricably woven, there is no going back.

Still, in 1972 I did go, if not “back,” then to familiarize myself with German painting collections. I also had a certain yen to see the house that had been my home for the first eleven years of my life.

So, after a few days spent in the Berlin museums, I set out on a leisurely walk to see my old neighborhood. Except for a few far-away dark clouds, it was a nice day, and West Berlin looked quite like any normal city—somewhat drab but prosperous and uncannily familiar. I stopped here and there, buying a paper, asking my way, pondering one of life’s milder ironies that only here—where I will never again feel at ease or at home—no one thought me a stranger. I was in the one place in the

world where I could speak the native tongue accent-free.

Truth be told, I found an unexpected pleasure in being once more surrounded by the sounds I came into the world hearing—the real German language, not the polite phrasings of the elderly refugees one meets in New York, but the living language as it is batted about in daily life. I took an almost embarrassing delight in speaking it casually, informally, responding and expanding easily on whatever subject was at hand. Berlinese expressions and expletives I had not used in more than half a century ran trippingly off my tongue, and I greedily sucked in those that had sprouted since my time. It was as if I’d just acquired a whole new vocabulary, which I found myself declaiming as if for the benefit of some unseen audience.

Yet, somehow, the most banal interchanges seemed staged, charged with meaning, full of a subtext I could not fathom. I was getting away with it, it occurred to me. But getting away with what?

Gradually, the here and now faded, the past closed in. The people hurrying by seemed surreal, unconvincing in their civilian disguise. Men, women, children—none of them looked right until changed into their proper uniforms, the men's complete with shining boots. I was moving as in a time warp, proceeding with the caution of someone dropped into enemy territory. Whom could I trust? Where were my people? The truth was, they were gone, my people. There was no one.

Finally, I came to Mannheimer Strasse. As I turned "our" corner, I halted apprehensively. But the corner pub, once crowded with merry-making brown-shirts had changed into a quite ordinary restaurant. Not a uniform in sight.

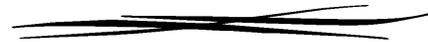
Little else had changed—Mannheimer Strasse was still the same quiet, residential street, treetops waving in the breeze. In the strong morning sun, the shadows were sharp, the contrast heightened by a cluster of dark clouds on the horizon. I saw few pedestrians—the street seemed unnaturally quiet.

Our house, number 34, was still there, but shorn, probably by a bomb blast, of its second floor, where our apartment had been. Aside from that, nothing was new, nothing was different. Even the weather was the same—the

dark clouds were now advancing, the sky turning as gray as I remembered it from my childhood.

It all looked unreal, a painted backdrop that would tremble at the touch. I stood on the opposite sidewalk, taking in the scene the way one does in the theater the moment after the curtain rises. The stage was set, scenery and props in place. Any minute now, the house door could open and one of us would step out—perhaps my mother, frowning up at the clouds, umbrella in one hand, holding six-year-old me by the other.

But nothing moved. That play was over, long ago.



## **A CLOSE CALL** **by Nancy Morrill**

One beautiful warm day in the mid-1960s on a visit to Manhattan when I was in my mid-twenties I had some time to kill, so I went window shopping.

Rounding the corner from Fifth Avenue onto 57th Street, I was walking along when a face in a window made me stop with astonishment. A painting of a female face totally drew me in. I had never seen a painting like it. I remember staring at it for many minutes, trying to decide if I should

go into the gallery—I had never been in an art sales gallery before. But I could not resist the pull of this work, and with trepidation pulled open the door of Pace Gallery.

The staff person welcomed me graciously and identified the painter of the fascinating face. I asked several questions and expressed an interest in the artist and his other work on display. The staffer called her colleague to join us, and they suggested I go upstairs with them where they would pull out more of the artist's work. This was an invitation I am sure was reserved for buyers. Intimidated and nervous, I sensed I would have to reveal I had never in my life purchased a painting and certainly did not intend to, given my low-level government salary. But the intimacy and excitement of the moment prompted me to accompany them.

I sat on a couch, and they kept pulling out painting after painting by the artist, telling me about each one. It was a thrilling opportunity for me—I felt as if I were discovering someone very important. Finally, I got up the courage to ask the cost of the painting in the window, still my favorite. They told me \$1,900. Wanting to be “cool,” I said I would have to think about it. Inside I was reeling: that price seemed an enormous sum to spend on a non-budgeted item. Of course, the staff offered to make the purchase easy with payments over a year. They rec-

ognized how much I was taken by the artist and how painful was my deliberation.

At last I stood up and thanked them profusely for spending so much time with me and asked them to convey to the artist how much his work had captivated a naïve stranger. And I left behind a Chuck Close painting offered for a paltry sum. His recent death reminds me of the importance of following one's instincts.

*Ten years after I had walked away from his painting, Close was shown in the world's finest galleries and was considered one of America's best contemporary artists, commanding colossal prices for his work and expensive commissions. His portrait of “Phil” sold for \$3.2 million and “John” sold for \$4.8 million. He received the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton.*

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## **THINKING OF ELEPHANTS IN THE TIME OF COVID**

**by Norval Reece**

During the days of covid self-isolation, most of us have spent a lot more time in our apartments than usual.

On some days, I thought about elephants, picturing those huge, magnifi-

cent creatures roaming freely across vast open plains.

“Why?” you may ask.

They came to mind months ago while I was rummaging through boxes of old notes and photos and came across a folder of the safari to Tanzania Ann and I took in 1999 with three other couples from Philadelphia.

In the middle of the Serengeti one evening as we were sitting around the campfire, we decided each of us would name a favorite animal from all those we had seen in the wild on this trip: lions, leopards, wildebeest, monkeys, dingos, giraffes, rhinos, hippos, elephants, alligators, ostriches, elands, dik dik, hyenas.

One woman chose the elephant or “Ellie” as she called it. She loved her Ellies and had raved about them often.

I said she reminded me of Morel, the protagonist in *The Roots of Heaven* by Romain Gary. For Morel, elephants were the greatest things on earth—“all that we poor earthbound souls can glimpse of heaven.”

Gary’s 1956 book, a Prix Goncourt winner, brilliantly discusses isolation, freedom, justice, war, cruelty, greed, the environment, and “the meaning of one’s existence.”

Morel says, “I first began thinking about elephants during the war, when I was a prisoner in Germany, probably because they were the most different thing I could imagine from what surrounded me: they were the very image of immense liberty.”

Morel goes on, “Every time we looked at the barbed wire or were almost dying of misery and claustrophobia in solitary confinement, we tried to think of those big animals marching irresistibly through the open spaces of Africa, and it made us feel better.”

He continues, “Barely alive, starved, exhausted, we would clench our teeth and follow our great free herds obstinately with our eyes and see them march across the savanna and over the hills, and we could almost hear the earth tremble under that living mass of freedom . . . . We held on to the image of that gigantic liberty, and somehow it helped us to survive.”

After the war, Morel relocated to Africa and began to physically attack the poachers of elephants. Arrested, he explained to the court that “it was essential to attack the root of the problem, the protection of nature.”

Peer Qvist, a supporting character in the book, explains: “Our needs—for justice, for freedom and dignity—are roots of heaven that are deeply

embedded in our hearts, but of heaven itself men know nothing but the gripping roots . . . .”

Although *The Roots of Heaven* is set shortly after WW II, its message is current: we need to care for the world around us—for justice, freedom, and dignity.

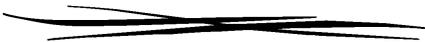


**ISLAND**  
by Elaine Ferrara

I sat on a rock on an island  
And from there I could see  
    The bay,  
    The sky,  
    The birds.  
    I felt free.  
I welcomed everything,  
Everything welcomed me.

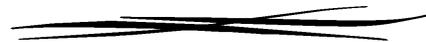
I listened to Nature’s music  
    In the wind.  
I observed Nature’s calmness  
    In the waves.  
Around me, things drifted  
And Time was stayed.

    I was alone.  
But I felt no loneliness  
And I felt no fear.



**ON THE LAST TRAIN  
TO GLADSTONE**  
by Claudia Burbank

Save the punctuation of small, distant  
lights,  
the night is unrelieved, black glass  
gives back the sagging face I see in  
mirrors.  
At this hour it’s easy to pretend vast  
swamps  
and iron-bound cities don’t exist.  
Station after station, the doors rumble  
open—  
no one, no one, the way a blind dog  
runs straight ahead, stops to listen,  
runs.  
At this hour it’s easy to pretend I  
could run  
through empty streets, turn a key and  
find  
my father still snoring like that man  
over there,  
slumped, dreaming of a woman not  
his wife.  
The one who has overshot his stop,  
who’ll come to, jolted, suddenly wild.



**GRAND ADVENTURE**  
by Kathy Hoff

Don’t promise your kids things you  
have to deliver on. I made that mis-  
take. I promised my younger son that  
for his twelfth birthday—twelve being  
the required minimum age—I would  
take him down to the bottom of the

Grand Canyon on a mule. I have no idea how that crazy enterprise originated. Ben was only nine when I made the promise. I must have thought that his twelfth birthday was infinitely distant—or that he would forget. It wasn't, and he didn't.

I also blame my mistake on the circumstances at the time of the promise. Right after Ben's ninth birthday, his dad had gone AWOL, and as a newly minted single mom, I was possessed by the need to show Ben, his brother Ted, and myself not only that we three could carry on and survive, but that we could even have grand (as in *Grand Canyon*) adventures.

We were operating smoothly by the time Ben turned twelve, but, alas, he had an excellent memory. I hadn't the heart to withdraw the twelfth-birthday promise. So in July 1980, the three of us flew to Phoenix. It was 117° on the tarmac when we got off the plane. We picked up our rental car, drove to a motel, and dove right into the pool. From Phoenix we worked our way north, taking in every cultural monument mom could find. Finally both boys begged, "No more Indian ruins, Mom."

The car itself proved a challenge. Unlike New Jersey, Arizona gas stations required self-service. Ted met the challenge unfazed, but when Ben insisted on doing what big brother

was doing, he pumped fuel down his jeans and onto his sneakers, creating a lingering gasoline stench that opening car windows in the 100+° Arizona heat did not dissipate. We also discovered as we hit uphill grades approaching Grand Canyon that our tiny Datsun, which could maintain speed on the flat, dropped to about 20 miles per hour when the air conditioning was drawing power. That irked drivers queued behind us.

Those were minor annoyances. At one park en route, visitors were offered the opportunity to crawl into a narrow lava cave. Naturally the boys were keen to do that, so mom donned a helmet with headlamp and crawled in with them. About one minute in, mom, stricken by claustrophobia, backed out. And waited and waited and waited. No boys emerged. After a long anxious time for mom, they finally crawled out with a good excuse. A fat boy had gotten wedged between them and the exit. He needed assistance getting extricated before they could get out. Yikes!

The grandest adventure still awaited. We chugged to the Grand Canyon in our little Datsun and showed up the morning of our mule trip reservation clad as recommended: long-sleeved shirts (sunburn protection) and broad brimmed hats (sun again) with anchoring ties under the chin (reason unclear—updrafts? bucking mules?).

The guide was grumpy about Ben, disbelieving that this little kid was truly twelve. I assured him he was and reminded him that three of us had paid for this trip. He put Ben on the gentlest mule, a female that regularly stopped to pee, holding up the whole line. “Just whip her,” the guide advised, demonstrating with a riding crop. He placed Ben right behind him in the line. Ted, the sturdiest-looking rider among our group, he put at the end of the line on Kick-A-Poo, appropriately named, as it turned out; he had a tendency to gallop when kicked. Unlike the boys, I had some experience riding, but my problem was that my stirrups couldn’t be shortened enough to reach my feet. After a day’s ride down and a day’s ride back up, that made for a sore underside.

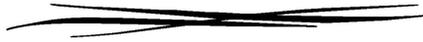
After all our group were mounted and lined up, we headed down the Bright Angel Trail. *Down* is the operative word—a long way down. The Grand Canyon is just that—*grand*, very deep. A short way down the trail, our guide had us pause, mules facing outward toward the grand drop. There he told us all the things we hadn’t been told when we signed up. Rules of the trail: when hikers and riders meet, hikers get the wall side, mules the drop-off side. Watch out for hills of fire ants at our overnight site at the bottom. Apply the provided riding crop liberally if your mule balks. No turning back after this point; anyone

discovering unconquerable acrophobia while gazing from high atop the mule into the abyss turn back—now or never. Of course with two eager boys mounted and ready to go, mom couldn’t chicken out, so onward we went.

I found the downward jog tolerable so long as I kept my eyes on the canyon wall to the left. Sneak peeks at the drop-off close by on the right were nauseating. That strategy worked fine until we hit an impossible section where the trail dropped off on both sides. I shut my eyes and trusted my mule. On this stretch, Ben dropped his crop, causing the guide to curse and get even grumpier as he climbed off his own mule to retrieve it. At our cautionary pause near the top, our guide had assured us that the mules were experienced and didn’t want to fall over the edge any more than we did. I wasn’t entirely reassured, especially since Ted’s Kick-A-Poo had already displayed a nasty habit of stopping to graze any bits of vegetation clinging to the edge. “Just give him a kick,” the guide would call back. I wasn’t certain that was good advice with Kick-A-Poo’s head stretched out over the brink. Maybe the trail’s Bright Angel wouldn’t protect Ted if Kick-A-Poo decided to try for one shrub too far.

But we all made it to the bottom where we had a good dinner and good

sleep. No fire ant attacks. Next day, we made it back, up and up and out via the South Kaibab Trail. We three survived.



## **VISIONARIES** by **Bob Anderson**

This story begins in 1917 when Edwin (“Teddy”) Wharton became headmaster of Pleasant Hill Academy in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee. The Academy was located between Knoxville and Nashville on the Cumberland Plateau, then one of the most desperately poor sections of the United States. Teddy dreamed of giving the boys and girls of the Plateau an education comparable to that given more privileged children.

Along with the headmaster came his spouse, Dr. May Cravath Wharton (1873-1959)—another dreamer. Born in Minnesota, May grew up on the South Dakota prairie where she survived blizzards and killed rattlesnakes. At age 28, she enrolled in the University of Michigan’s School of Medicine, an unusual career choice for a female of her times.

At the Academy, she became the school doctor. The year after May and Teddy arrived, the Spanish Flu invaded the region. In her completely captivating memoir, *Doctor Woman of the*

*Cumberlands*, May tells what happened then and thereafter.

The doctor saw a need so she met the need; it was as simple and as complicated as that.

But Edwin died in 1920. A disconsolate May explained to her assistant, Elizabeth Fletcher, why they had to leave the Plateau.

But the townspeople saw the matter differently. They petitioned Dr. Wharton to reconsider.

“The people here want you to stay as their doctor and pay you monthly and also help you with your hospital. We feel that we cannot do without you.”

May could not do without them either:

“For a long time that night I sat with the petition of my neighbors before me, resolving solemnly to do as much for them as they this day had done for me. I resolved that mothers should be saved; that little children should be given a fair start in life; that pneumonia, pellagra, diabetes, anemia and all the rest should not go on and on until no medical skill should cure them; that the old and invalid should have some comfort and care even when they could not be mended; and that those far from doctors should have medical aid brought within reach—of

their homes and their thin pocket-books.”

The next year Dr. Wharton and Miss Fletcher opened Sanex, a two-bed hospital. Alice Adshead, a registered nurse, joined them and they built a sanitarium. The three planned how to spread a health care system throughout the Plateau. Miss Adshead went deep into the hills and hollows to teach Red Cross classes in “Home Hygiene and Care of the Sick.” They also built numerous outpatient clinics in such places as Pilot Knob, Big Lick, and Ozone.

Thirty years later, another visionary arrived in Ozone. In the summer of 1949, George Kurtz, having just finished his junior year at the University of Pennsylvania, came to Ozone with a contingent of students to build the Alice Adshead Health Center, the last of May Wharton’s clinics.

George is now a long-time Pennswood Village resident. But when he recently dined with Peggy and me and re-lived the glory days in Ozone, he seemed twenty again. Peggy and I were so entranced we immediately changed the route we had mapped out for our upcoming trip to New Orleans. We were determined to find and photograph the clinic George helped build. We succeeded—the foundation stone is still solid.

You can read about George’s life in his engaging autobiography: *Something in Return: Memoirs of a Life in Medicine*. It’s in the Pennswood Library. Here’s an excerpt from his chapter on the inspiration provided by Ozone:

“I, for one, was thrilled with the sense of a job well done. A community center/health center had been built, and built solidly. And it would serve the people of that area for many years to come. I believe the experience unconsciously solidified my desire to make my life one of service.”

His service included teaching ophthalmologists in Tanzania how to insert an artificial lens into the eye at the time of cataract removal, and he oversaw the first lens implantation in Tanzania.

While we were in Ozone, Peggy and I also visited the museum in Pleasant Hill where we received Dr. Wharton’s book as a present from the museum’s curator. A plaque celebrates the medical team’s long list of accomplishments in reaching out throughout the Plateau. Near the top of the list is “Eye Clinics.” That listing warmed our hearts because of George’s history in Ozone.

In 1950, Doctor Wharton’s audacious dream culminated in the opening of the Cumberland Medical Center in

Crossville. Thirty years after she began dreaming and scheming, the Plateau had its first hospital serving the region as a whole. What had once seemed visionary and unattainable had been realized and attained.

May Wharton can be thankful to George and his fellow workers for building the early clinic and proud of George for continuing in her footsteps.

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**THE SEARCH  
FOR TREASURE  
RECONSIDERED**  
by John Wood

Not in the moon and stars,  
Nor in the glare of neon-lit marquee  
But in a small, reclusive roadside  
scarlet pimpernel  
That did not flash its ware—It is there  
the treasure found.  
Though you scan both earth and sky;  
The search be far and wide and  
everywhere.  
It is in the little roadside gem you find  
reflection  
Of the riches that you bear.  
Need solely seeing eye, not magic  
carpet, to get you there.

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