How I Became Close Personal Friends with Artie Shaw
by Seth Kibel

Compared to the bulk of the Osher student body, I am a relatively young man at 38 years old. Yet I often find myself lecturing about music and people that thrived and prospered long before I thrived and prospered. This irony is further highlighted when I discover that many of my students have had direct experiences and interactions with some of the very people and places I’m discussing.

For the most part, I can’t compete. I have met very few of the individuals about whom I lecture; most passed away before I was even born. Yet I do have one good story to relate—that of how I came to be close personal friends with big band legend and stellar clarinetist Artie Shaw.

The year was 1997. My wife and I had been married for all of a year, and had yet to start a family. That summer, we took a vacation to California. We purposely didn’t have many specific plans. We were going to rent a car in L.A. and slowly make our way up to San Francisco, stopping along the way as our muses directed.

At this point in my musical development, I had become quite a devotee of the music of Artie Shaw. I got my hands on every recording I could find. I studied his playing, and copied his solos. So when a drummer friend of mine heard of our vacation plans, he offered up this ridiculous suggestion: “Why don’t you try to meet Artie while you’re out there?”
I pretty much dismissed his idea out of hand, as I do with pretty much anything a drummer tells me. Nonetheless, the thought wouldn’t leave the back of my mind. Now, the internet was still in its infancy back then, but there was, indeed, a website for Artie Shaw. I had no idea who was behind it, but it sold several CDs and books by the swing legend, who was still very much alive at the age of 87 (he passed away in 2004). And there was an address listed on the website for Newbury Park, California, which is where I already knew Artie Shaw had become one of American music’s great recluses. I suspected this might be the address of a manager, or perhaps a business office, but I scribbled it down, and stuck it in my luggage.

A few days later, my wife and I were driving on the L. A. freeway, and there was a sign for “Newbury Park.” I talked her into letting us take a brief detour. We took the exit, and pulled into a gas station. I walked inside and showed the guy behind the counter the address. He indicated that we were all of five minutes away and gave me detailed directions.

His directions led us into a nice, solidly middle-class neighborhood. At the end of a cul-de-sac was one house, considerably bigger than all the others. We parked our rental car, and got out. There was a large iron-wrought gate, peppered with welcoming signs such as, “No Trespassing,” and “No Solicitors.” A cat wandered out through the gate. That’s right—I petted Artie Shaw’s cat.

We rang the buzzer for the electronic intercom posted on the gate. We saw a curtain part and then return to its closed position. No answer. We buzzed a second time. Still, no answer. The fierce guard cat nuzzled my leg. Thwarted in our efforts, we departed the Shaw compound.

Nonetheless, I was unable to stop ruminating over my failed quest. “I really think that was Artie Shaw’s house,” I kept telling my wife. “That must’ve been him gazing at us through the curtains. We petted Artie Shaw’s cat.”

Back at the hotel, after humoring my ramblings for a while, my wife finally offered a suggestion. “Why don’t you just call him?” she said. I scoffed. “I don’t have his phone number.” “Well, just call information,” my darling bride replied. I scoffed even more. “There’s no way his number is going to be listed.” “Well, just try anyway,” replied my patient spouse.

So, I called information.

“City and state please.”
“Newbury Park, California.”
“What listing?”
“Artie Shaw.”
“I’m sorry, sir,” said the pleasant woman on the other end of the line, “I don’t have any listing for that name.”

I was about to hang up the phone in a fit of smugness when this lovely woman suddenly chimed in, “Well, I do have a listing for an ‘A. Shaw.’”

“Is it at…” and I read her the address we had visited just the other day.

“Yes, sir, it is,” was the reply.

In utter amazement, I wrote down Artie Shaw’s phone number.

The next day, we returned to the same gas station we had previously stopped at off the L. A. freeway, just down the road from Artie’s abode. As I was a starving musician in 1997, I did not yet own a cell phone. So I picked up a pay phone, and dialed the number I had received.

“Hello?” said a gruff, aged voice on the other end of the line.

“Is Mr. Shaw available?” I inquired meekly.

“Who wants to know?” came the immediate reply.

“Well, my name is Seth Kibel, and I’m a professional clarinetist, and a huge fan of his, and I’m right down the road, and I was just wondering if I could maybe come over and shake his hand since he’s been such a profound influence on me and he’s my hero and I’ll just take a minute of his time and it would mean so much to me,” I rambled.

“Mr. Shaw doesn’t see visitors.”

At this point, I had pretty much figured out that I was speaking to the man himself, so I called his bluff.
“Well, Mr. Shaw, I apologize for the imposition, but I’ve come all the way from Virginia and I’m just down the road at the gas station. I promise I won’t take more than a minute of your time.”

“I’m an old man living by myself. You could tie me up and steal all my things,” he yelled.

That idea hadn’t actually occurred to me, but now that he mentioned it…

Anyhow, this continued on for about a minute or two, until I played the last card in my hand. “Mr. Shaw, I have a copy of your autobiography (The Trouble with Cinderella—An Outline of Identity, one of the strangest autobiographies you’ll ever read) with me, and it’d mean so much if you’d just sign it for me.”

He didn’t bite. “Mail it to me, and I’ll sign it and send it back,” was the angry reply, followed by a click and a dial tone.

Dejectedly, we departed Newbury Park, and we made our way north, so I could drown my sorrows in Napa Valley.

Upon our return to our home in Alexandria, Virginia, I proceeded to write a long love note to the cantankerous clarinetist. I explained how important his music was to me, and how profoundly he had influenced my own musical development. I talked about my own career and ambitions, and how I aspired to follow in his footsteps. I included several CDs of my own recordings and, of course, the aforementioned autobiography.

About six months later, I received a plain brown envelope in the mail. Inside was the book I mailed to Newbury Park. No note, no signature, no nothing. I checked every page for some sign that Artie Shaw had acknowledged my existence, but to no avail.

So there you have it, my dear Osher pupils. The story of how I came to be close personal friends with Artie Shaw. Or at least, petted his cat.

A Shirt Tale
by Helen Szymkowiak

It’s a Fruit-of-the-Loom ladies tee shirt, pale pink, medium size. What makes it unique is the design in the center, a rebus, with these artfully rendered depictions: an eye, a hook, a Roman numeral four, and a little framed picture. It was a gift from a friend who apparently designed it on line and had it made for me. What inspired the gift was my account of a tour that I gave at the Walters Art Museum. I had been a volunteer docent for a number of years when a request was made for a tour of religious art in the collection.

The day requested was a Saturday, and the group wanted a Catholic docent, if possible. Now, many of the docents live a goodly distance from the museum, and weekend tours are never popular, since docents are required to attend class once a week, so another trip downtown is not popular.

Since I lived in town, a trip to the Walters was just a bus ride away and I had that Saturday free, so the group was going to get this Unitarian for their docent. I wasn’t too concerned that I didn’t know enough; The Walters educates docents very meticulously, and expects them to augment class content with study on their own. Besides, I had designed a tour, “Women at the Walters,” which I had given for a number of women’s groups, so I felt well prepared. Since much of the collection is art with religious themes, I was up on the lives of the saints and the Holy Family. I had planned on showing and discussing a few Bible stories and lots of Madonnas and Annunciations in the tour hour. The Walters has an ample supply of both.

We always contact the person requesting the tour, and I was instructed to call “Tom.” When the person answering the phone said “Rectory,” I tried asking for “Father Tom.” That worked, and Father Tom told me that he and the sodality of his church in Baltimore County were looking forward to the tour. I had always thought of sodality members as being older ladies, and now I was sure that I had made the correct choices for the tour’s content.

The day arrived, and a group of ladies, young to middle age, entered the Walters, led by Father Tom, who looked like a high school senior. It’s not unusual
for county dwellers to brave the big, bad city, and the excitement in the group was palpable. There is a time, at the beginning of every tour, when the docent must ascertain the expectations of the group, no matter if they’re a class of five-year-olds, or a group of senior citizens expanding their horizons.

I sensed that this group wanted a more exciting tour than the one I had planned. And so I pulled out all the stops: St. Agatha holding wicked pincers against her beautiful bare breast, St. Lawrence being toasted on a gridiron, St. Apollonia with her bloody tooth, St. Sebastian pierced with arrows, St. Barbara about to be beheaded by her father, and on and on—one gruesome story of martyrdom after another. We actually did look at a few Madonnas, too. They ate it up, as the cliché goes.

An hour and three quarters later, I ended the tour to a round of applause and profuse thanks. Then the group conferred, sort of in a football-huddle-like formation, and then I was presented with a twenty dollar bill—for myself. They had each already paid an entry fee, and the Walters had exacted a forty dollar fee for the tour, and here they were, giving me a gift. It was very kind of them, but I felt a little insulted, rather like a cheap hooker, as I said to my friend who had presented me with the gift shirt. So the rebus read, “I HOOK FOR ART.” I contributed the twenty dollars to the Walters, and I blush to admit that I never told those nice ladies that I wasn’t Catholic.

Egyptian Rules of the Road
(as observed)
by Wayne Faulkner

Traffic signs and signals:
Traffic signs are informative (and decorative) only.
Traffic signals take precedence over signs, especially in decorative value.

The following rules are optional:
Red light means stopping is permitted.
Right turn on red light is permitted.
Left turn on red light is permitted.
Straight ahead on red light is permitted.
Green light means honk your horn and go. Honking serves three purposes:
• It announces the light change to drivers who have crept halfway into the intersection.
• It wakes up drivers in front of you.
• It proves you’re not asleep.
Yellow light means nothing.

Turning and passing:
Passing is permitted anywhere: intersections, on/off ramps, road shoulders, and sidewalks are good examples of places to pass cars that impede your progress.
Lane markers are decorative only. Make efficient use of all road surfaces by straddling lane markers or creating temporary lanes wherever your vehicle will fit.

NOTE: A car is about as wide as a camel.

Turn signals are used by foreigners to demonstrate their ignorance of local driving customs and etiquette. Most turn signals are inoperative or cross-wired so as to flash on the wrong side. It is safer not to use them at all.

Parking:
Park anywhere. Sidewalks are best, but driveways, alleys, and intersections are also good. Foreigners
should not park in plazas, squares, and narrow streets—these are reserved for Egyptians, who park anywhere.

General:

Always drive in the most unconventional, ill-advised, and inconsistent manner possible. Besides arousing amusing responses from foreigners, constant reckless unpredictability is the only way to ensure that other drivers can fully anticipate your next foolhardy move. This is the key to safe driving. Remember, “Driving is an art.”

Holiday Entertainment—Going to the Movies with Kids

by Martha McCoy

“You’ve got to be joking,” said my friend. “No, I really do,” I replied. “I have a great time.” She couldn’t believe it. No sane adult actually chooses to go to a movie with children. But I do, especially during the holidays, when schools are not in session, when the movie industry pulls out all of the stops, filling theaters with its version of “child entertainment”—some of it bad but a lot of it good. Not only do I get to see a movie, but I also get to be part of a group that has a fresh outlook on just about everything—albeit this outlook is housed in a noisy, wiggly, sticky, popcorn-covered exterior.

I usually go to the movies with not just one kid, but groups of kids—four, five, or even nine! I get to look at the movie from the perspective of a two-year-old all the way up to the lofty sophistication of an eleven-year-old.

Sitting in the dark theater beside eight-year-old Bobby, I hitch a ride on the rollercoaster of his emotions—one minute he is slapping his leg and howling with laughter as a favorite cartoon character “breaks wind” or burps; a few minutes later he is leaning forward, entranced by the story of Beauty and the Beast.

The cool, laid-back humor of Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones fractures the adults as they watch Men in Black, while it misses the younger set completely, who instead are charmed by the miniature aliens and amazed by the weird visual effects.

Timmy, however puts the whole experience into perspective as he settles back, popcorn on his lap (soon to be spilled) and pink drink tentatively anchored in a holder provided by the theater management. As he watches the junk-food-costumed Raisins bop onto the screen in a pre-movie commercial, he leans close to me and confides in a whisper, “This is my favorite part, Grandma.”

So don’t try to convince me that going to the movies with children is crazy. Where else can I get this kind of entertainment!

Proverbs XVI:18

by Jacob Radin

Solomon, or whoever was the author of Proverbs XVI:18, had it right. Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

The parking lot at the Myerberg Senior Center was so crowded on Thursday that I was forced to leave my car on the adjoining residential lot. No matter. My back was better. I could walk briskly to the fitness center. I felt I was ninety again. As I approached the entrance I overtook an old gentleman plodding along behind his walker. I swaggered past him like an impatient driver on I-695. Suddenly I was airborne, making a three-point landing on the pavement—left hand, left shoulder, and left side of my face. I had tripped over the curb.

The man with the walker reached down to help me get up, and together we entered the reception area of the building. I was bleeding from a cut over my left eye. The receptionist called immediately for outside help. My new-found-friend stayed with me. Introducing himself, he pulled out a hospital ID card. The picture showed a middle-aged man, Dr. Robert F, staff psychiatrist. He was at the Center for lunch. This is one of his retirement activities. In about five minutes, two clean-shaven men wearing yarmulkes (the traditional Hebrew skullcap) burst through the front door. The one in charge took a look at the wound over my eye. “It will need stitches.
We will take you to Sinai Hospital.” I live in an area heavily populated by Orthodox Jews, who are fiercely independent. They have established their own neighborhood medical response system known as Hatzalah. “What does that word mean?” I asked. “Save,” said the younger medic. Hatzalah has its own well-equipped ambulance which was summoned, and arrived without delay.

At the hospital, the medic stayed with me until a cubicle was empty. Then, running behind the wheelchair, he provided me with an exciting ride through the hallway. My left wrist and arm were x-rayed. No fractures. A CT scan of my skull showed no concussion. During the time I was undergoing these tests, a telephone message from Dr. Robert F.’s home was relayed to me. Since my car was parked at the lot near the Myerberg, he insisted on picking me up at the hospital and then delivering me to my car. What a spontaneous act of pure kindness from a man, who hours ago was a complete stranger, a man who relied on a walker to get around.

P.S. Yesterday, I had an appointment with my orthopedist. He recommended that I be fitted for a walker. My original impulse was to resist. I don’t need it. It slows my gait. I recalled Solomon and Proverbs XVI:18. When I left the doctor’s office I was pushing a walker.

Once Upon a Summer
by Barbara Orbock

There was a week in a summer, long ago—once upon a time when I was ten. Daddy gives one last wipe to our old maroon Plymouth. As I settle in the back seat, the chrome ship ornament on the hood catches the morning sun, winks and says to only me, “I’ve passed inspection. Onward.” My parents take their seats; we back out of the drive and head to the most beloved spot of my childhood—Ocean City.

The route is familiar since my family has vacationed there every summer since I was two. We take Route 40 to Havre de Grace and cross the Susquehanna. As we near Elkton we pass the tourist cabins owned by the King of the Gypsies. He is an acquaintance of my father and I wait for the latest description of the King’s flamboyant outfits and diamond-studded teeth. Then Route 896 in Delaware takes us across the C&D Canal. If there is a ship coming through we will stop and watch. My mother will be bored, but my father and I have seafaring blood. Lunch is at the Wayside Inn in Smyrna. I already know what I will order—mashed potatoes with gravy, stewed tomatoes, and a chocolate milkshake. My mother has long since given up telling me the combination will make me sick. It never has and I suspect she is a little disappointed.

Back in the car we turn on Route 1 and soon pass Dover Air Force Base. Giant camouflaged cargo planes are lined up by the hangars and I remember we are at war. A Douglas C-54 is coming in, very low and loud, right above us. I want to be a pilot.

As we near the beach I move close to the open window. I smell it before I see it—sun, sand, salt, and sea—only a dune away. Plane-spotting towers line the coastal road, barbed wire fences keep out all but military personnel, and pillboxes are sandbagged and manned by gunners.
A half hour passes and I spot the lighthouse at Fenwick as we hit the Maryland Line. More stretches of deserted dunes and a few scattered bayside shacks are the only scenery. And then we are there. Our room at the Stephan Decatur Hotel is small. The adjoining bathroom has a toilet, tub, and sink, all stained yellow, prompting my mother to remind me not to drink the water. I beg to go immediately to the beach and my parents discuss it. Mother reluctantly agrees, but then brightens as she unpacks her brand new bathing suit. We find a spot on the beach close to the water. Daddy and I immediately head for the surf; Mother is non-aquatic, but as I run seaward I look back. She is smiling and waves to us. She is beautiful.

During the week I spend hours in the ocean and am at last proficient in body surfing. As a family we scour the beach for shells and driftwood. At times this can be a challenge because of the large globs of tar and oil that have washed ashore from sunken ships. I make friends with a local girl of my age who makes ankle bracelets from fishing cords and sells them on the boardwalk. She teaches me and I become a junior partner.

One afternoon Daddy and I drive to West Ocean City and watch the fishing trawlers come in with the day’s catch. On another day we go to the pleasure docks to see if anyone has hooked a marlin. Evenings are varied. The amusements are open until dark—then the boardwalk is blacked out. Twice we go to Trimper’s to ride the carousel and drive the bumper cars, then munch on Fisher’s caramel corn or Thrasher’s French fries. It is here I learn how much better fries are with vinegar.

On another evening Daddy and I seek out the colored nightclub on Baltimore Avenue. My mother refers to it as a dive and won’t go. But then she really doesn’t like jazz. Ocean City is, of course, segregated and it is strange to see so many dark faces in one place. This club, however, gets the talents of Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, so like my father and me, there are many white people willing to stand on the sidewalk gazing in through clouds of smoke just to hear the music. There are no lighted streetlamps anywhere and all the windows are covered with blackout curtains, but my parents and I venture to Ninth Street where there is a shop with a small back room filled with slot machines. By law, I am forbidden to play, but my father lets me pull the handle on the one-armed bandits.

When we hit the jackpot, he inserts one last nickel and I pull the handle one last time. He says it’s good manners to “pay off the machine.”

And somewhere in this week comes August 10th. The news spreads rapidly—the Japs have surrendered—the WAR is over—the boys will come home. After dinner, the hotel is swarming. Musicians appear, women change into their best dresses, and rounds of drinks are bought at the bar. There is loud singing and much laughter. People kiss people they don’t even know. Someone throws confetti. AND I AM PUT TO BED. I am not a defiant child, but THIS IS NOT FAIR. I fought this war too—hoeing the Victory Garden, that giant ball of tinfoil I saved, those war stamps I bought with my own money, and letters I wrote to GI Joes. Indignant now, I get out of bed and in my pajamas, make my way down the stairs. They usually creak, but no one will hear them tonight. When the lobby comes into view I sit and watch. That is all I want to do. I don’t drink, I can’t dance in pjs, and I certainly don’t want to kiss someone I don’t know.

A conga line has begun. My parents are near the front. As they pass the stairs my father looks up and sees me. He leaves the line and I hightail it back to bed. But he is too quick. He catches my hand and leads me downstairs to the bar where he says something I can’t hear to the bartender. I look at the clock—it’s two a.m. When the conga is over the bartender speaks to the bandleader who nods to my father. Daddy scoops me up and sits me on the bar. The band strikes up “HAPPY BIRTHDAY.” It is August 11th, 1945 and I am TEN YEARS OLD.

HALFWAY HOME
by Anonymous

Red balloons glisten and shine
Bounce in the wind, stretching each line.
Black ones add a mournful elation
To card tables readied with bright decoration;
Setting the scene for this celebration
Where hidden terrors reign supreme.
Friends and families surround;  
Pink punch and salad greens abound;  
Hamburgers sizzle on the grill,  
All trying anxiously to still  
The loneliness of the mentally ill  
In a make-believe mainstream.

A tentative step toward a normal world,  
Where each had belonged until life unfurled.  
Past equilibrium erased;  
Irrational thought now assuming its place  
Camouflaged by a party face  
That hides, for a time, emotions that teem.

Underneath the sun’s bright glare,  
Introductions fill the air.  
Each one careful not to say  
The thoughts and fears that fill his day;  
Concerns that heavy on them weigh;  
Imagined futures cloaked in gray.

Halting conversations flourish.  
News from home that hopes to nourish  
Lonesome souls whose light chitchat  
Sometimes instead becomes a caveat  
Of daily distance from all that;  
And discontent with habitat.

Some, alone, stand on the edge  
Waiting for a stranger to pledge  
A moment of time to talk about things;  
Of weather and sports, performers who sing;  
Topics of general interest that bring  
Passing relief from their anguishing.

The gathering ends as the sun disappears  
Causing spirit descent and resumption of fears.  
Eyes quietly lower, hands become nervous  
As panicked emotions threaten to surface  
And sabotage the assembly’s purpose  
With silent aches that turn into screams.

Families and friends slowly depart,  
A smile on each face, despair in each heart.  
Knowing for certain the battles with rage  
That each of their loved ones is destined to wage  
In anguished pursuit of behaviors assuaged;  
That allow them to live every-day dreams.

Dreams of jobs, homes of their own,  
These normal things they once had known;  
Elusive now, beyond their grasp,  
Each tries to reach and firmly clasp  
Some goodness from his long, lost past;  
Shattered lives to redeem.

My Grate on E Street  
by August Spector

My address is this Grate on E Street in front of State  
It’s a fine place to park my body and soul  
Warm in winter, pleasant in summer  
Trees protect me, State too.

When passersby see me with others sit’en or ly’en on  
the Grate  
Right away they look away
Guess they don’t like what they see
Maybe they have fear they too could be sit’ en here
with me

Had another life before I came
Got sick and tired … clients dishonest, prosecutor
hurried, juries uninformed, judge not judging
System stunk, couldn’t take the odor of it all, removed
myself from the bench
Searched throughout the crowded busy world for a
sweeter place
Found this Grate on E Street in front of State, the
sweetest place to contemplate

Today woke to food behind the diner
Takes care of breaking the morning fast
Buckets of bacon, eggs and jam
Good bacon, a little dry the eggs … cold but
nourishing all the same
Left behind by those passersby on their trip up town

Crowds travel quickly, here and there, work calling
them to duty
Look at them walking … rushing … heads up … as if
to beat others to their end
Cell phones in their ears … talking quickly … loudly
as they walk
Their actions, I wonder if they give any thought
If so, they might settle on my Grate on E Street in
front of State, where they’d learn to contemplate

Today’s lunch at a bistro
Sitting in this upscale eatery for their moment of
reprieve, tasty servings consumers receive
Guess they believe the chef’s the cook, though all he
did was open this can with his hook

So, real truth’s behind in these green trash pails lying
on their sides
Where, half-empty, these cans of chili survive

Pushing my cart I take a walk just past the park
There on a bench a well-dressed man, a portable
computer on his knee
An ear connected to his cell, as you can see
Making key decisions … solving problems of his day
But what he’s really doing is causing stress within on
his way to the end
Rushing … cell phone … walking and talking
Reporting in at nine … reporting out at five
Not for me, I left those cells, those crowds behind
For a sweeter smelling peaceful place to relocate
At my Grate on E Street in front of State

You Can Call Me Al
by Janet George

Do you know Al Buls? A couple of days ago I watched
as a new member of Osher, barely gray around the
temples, asked if he could join us at the lunch table. We
all said yes, and as he sat we heard him ask Al how long
he had belonged to Osher. Al looked up, assessing the
career-sized chunk of time he had devoted to lifelong
learning, and seemed to murmur to himself in surprise,
lots of time, lots of time.

Al does go way back, especially with Memoirs class,
first as a raw recruit with Margaret Osburn, later as
a coordinator, and last as the leader of the pack. He
was born in Garland, Nebraska, and wrote of his early
years on a farm. He was fascinated by the town’s water
tower burning down. He remembered walking home
from the last lamppost on the main drag into the vast
prairie night with only the stars and his imagination
for company.
Like most memoir writers he wrote largely about his family. He married Velma in June of 1947. They both taught school for a time and then built their family, four children, six grandchildren, and one great grandson. While this was happening he served as a Lutheran pastor. He was ordained in 1953 and has had churches in Illinois and Missouri. He poured writing talent into sermons and teaching, but also into preparing his family for the sheep farm, one of the joys of his retirement.

The sheep farm is where the Buls family spends Thanksgiving weekends. The whole family brings the fixings for the big feast, but also the plans and instructions for games, poems, stories, dramas, and any creative activity that seems like fun. Al and Velma have kept this fun going for years. I understand that Al never fails to compose poems and songs for every kid, for every occasion. On that special weekend the creative juices, as well as the turkey’s ones, flow freely.

Al retired in 1987, and by that time he had amassed a large body of work for the family fun times. He continued to preach at different churches, as well as his own, but did lots of other stuff. For instance, one year he went off with a group of teenagers to camp, hike, and canoe in the northern wilds of Minnesota. He liked to cut down trees and split wood for his children’s fireplaces. His one octogenarian-friendly hobby is growing heirloom tomatoes and other vegetables in his garden. May that bring him joy for many years.

He’s good at the memoirs scene. He knows how to praise, how to encourage and how to present criticism gently. He has discovered, like the rest of us in the class, the real excitement and value of the group. We have had one person storm out of the room declaring that we are crazy for allowing others to criticize our work, but most members are like Jane, the Chinese woman who painted beautiful images, with her broken English, of her childhood in China. Or a Holocaust survivor who shared heart-wrenching memories or a Dutch man who described how an unexploded V2 rocket landed in the local church of his small town. There’s lots of growing to do yet.

Come visit Al and memoirs some time. Drop in and give us a piece of your mind. You might like it. I know Al will.

**Pawnshop**

by Jerry Mandelberg

It sits right in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue. The flashing outdoor lights and the three brass balls draw a steady stream of money-needers who have something of value—they think—to pawn. The novices come with some hope of getting a reasonable sum for the radio or TV that they’re pawning; the regulars know better. They live in hope, but some are more easily disappointed. They don’t know that the pawnshop doesn’t deal in hope—it deals in misery.

Downstairs, in the pawnshop, flashing neon lights and blue-white spots bounce off every shiny surface, giving a party flavor where no joy and happiness seem to have a right to exist. People of every type, style, color, shape, and disposition come into this place. Here are hustle-bustle, loud voices, grumbles, banter, deals, slick glass and chrome counters, rows on rows of glistening gold-filled watches, sparkling diamond rings, cameras, and suits. Each ring—each camera—each suit, seems to be
a piece of someone’s life, surgically removed, without anesthetic. My mind flashes back to that final scene in the movie *Planet of the Apes* where Charlton Heston, who is living sometime in the future and believes he is on a planet other than Earth, walks along a beach to suddenly come upon the corroded remains of a giant-sized figure—the Statue of Liberty. Am I looking at the artifacts of a terribly-flawed society?

Upstairs, here in the storeroom, the pawnshop presents its real face. It is dark, dismal, and disheartening. It is more than that. It is aggressive. It is devouring. It is corrosive. Dust and dirt are everywhere. As long as I have worked here—some two years—I have never heard of anyone coming up to clean. I can barely see the grey-white edges of the shelves that run around the walls of the whole room. And on these shelves rest the postponed dreams of all our customers—maybe postponed forever. Scattered throughout this deep black cavern are bare bulbs with pull-strings. No pull, no light. Here the burnt-out bulbs seem appropriate.

The darkness seems to stir vestigial memories of long-forgotten pains. Why is darkness frightening? What are these long-forgotten pains that now I only see by their edges? I look for a window. Is that one there? Over there were windows, but the years of accumulated dust and grime have made them near-invisible. Here is one. I rub two clear spots on the glass and laser-sharp beams of sunlight blast through the blackness. The floor is carpeted in thick dust so that as I walk, clouds rise from the floor and spiral their way up, through and around the crisp narrow light of the twin beams. The brightness of the sunbeams seems alien in this place—a shrine to failure.

I find what I need, and leave as fast as I can.
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