Astronomy at the Top of the World
by Jim O’Leary

Where on Earth would you go to have the clearest, darkest, driest skies for observing the heavens? Your options might include a tall mountain, or a locale far from civilization and its spreading domes of lights. You might also think of dry locations, where the air is crystal clear and free from humidity, which blurs incoming starlight.

Any of these locations would be great. All combined would be ideal. And that’s what the South American nation of Chile offers—the highest, darkest, driest conditions on the planet for observing the night sky and teasing out its secrets.

Last summer I was fortunate to be among nine astronomy educators chosen from across the US to travel to Chile and visit the remote astronomy observatories located there, meeting with astronomers and other astronomy educators. The Astronomy in Chile Educator Ambassador Program is funded by the National Science Foundation and looks to spread the word about US-supported astronomy research facilities in Chile, where the US spends tens of millions of dollars each year supporting astronomy research.

So why Chile? Its Andes Mountains tower 13,000 feet high on average. They keep the moist air from the nearby Amazon rain forest from reaching northern Chile, helping provide a dry climate. Northern Chile also boasts
the driest non-polar desert in the world, the Atacama. Technically, Antarctica’s Dry Valleys are the world’s driest desert, having seen no rain for nearly two million years! The Atacama can’t match that, but there are places there that received no rain for 400 years. Average annual rainfall across the Atacama today is just slightly above half an inch. Baltimore, for comparison, averages 42 inches per year.

Pair Chile’s environmental conditions with a government that welcomes the astronomy community and works to keep light levels low and you have an ideal place for viewing the sky as clearly as possible from the surface of our planet.

Our astronomy educator group began its journey in the capital city, Santiago. Located more than 1,700 feet above sea level in the country’s central valley, Santiago is about as far south of the equator as Los Angeles is north. Its weather is similar to LA’s, although the seasons in the southern hemisphere are the reverse of ours. Our late June arrival coincided with the start of southern winter. Santiago also suffers an LA-like problem—air pollution that gets trapped for days by the surrounding mountains. The few days we were there, traffic was restricted to odd/even license plates on alternating days.

From Chile we flew north to the coastal town of La Serena with its San Diego-like location and weather. The first large astronomy observatory was built in 1974 on Cerro Tololo about 50 miles inland from La Serena. (“Cerro” translates from the Spanish as “hill” or “mountain.”) Cerro Tololo houses a number of telescope domes atop its 7,200 foot peak, so many that a collection of smaller ones is dubbed the “mushroom farm.” It’s an iconic site in astronomy, and we were privileged to spend two nights on the mountain sleeping in dorms usually occupied by visiting astronomers and eating in their well-stocked cafeteria.

We toured the largest Cerro Tololo observatory, housing the large four-meter telescope. The telescope mirror that collects faint starlight measures four meters across, about 13 feet, and dominates the inside of the giant dome. An advanced 570-megapixel camera sits atop the four-meter telescope probing “dark energy,” a mysterious force that is accelerating the expansion of the Universe.

A larger telescope sits atop nearby Cerro Pachon. The Gemini telescope is located here, and true to its name, it has a twin telescope on the Big Island of Hawaii. Between them, they can observe the entire sky. Inside its dome is a modern telescope with a 27-foot diameter mirror. Attached to the giant scope is an advanced electronic camera known as the Gemini Planet Finder. It probes nearby stars looking for Jupiter-sized planets orbiting other stars in distant solar systems.

The pinnacle of our trip in more ways than one was the newest Atacama observatory, known as ALMA—the Atacama Large Millimeter Array. This collection boasts 66 giant radio dishes that search the sky in wavelengths far beyond what our eyes can see. These faint signals reveal newly born galaxies as far as 13 billion light years away and newly formed stars and planets.

Becoming fully operational in 2013, one of ALMA’s first discoveries was of a young “toddlers” solar system in the process of formation. This young system sports a central star similar to an early Sun surrounded by a dusty disk where newborn planets are forming. Never before have we seen detail such as this, confirming our ideas about how our Solar System came into being and proving the power of the ALMA array.

ALMA’s special nature is its location on the lofty Chajnantor plateau 16,404 feet above sea level. At this height, we were above 50% of the Earth’s atmosphere where the air is extremely thin. Supplemental oxygen is available, and paramedics followed us around to monitor our well-being during our two-hour stay.

The priceless part of a journey to the southern hemisphere is the pristine—and alien—sky. Viewing the night sky from these pitch-dark locations shows more stars than most of us have ever seen. And being south of the equator, most of the stars are ones not visible from our northern latitudes. The Milky Way arches high overhead, a ribbon of starry light marking the center of our home galaxy. The Southern Cross, as iconic as our northern Big Dipper, marks an easily found star grouping, and leads the eye to Alpha Centauri, the closest star beyond the Sun, at a distant 25 trillion miles from Earth.
Peering across the Milky Way, we see traces of the mythology of the ancient Incas who first populated this region. They did not imagine pictures with star patterns as did the early Greeks and Romans. Instead, they used the dark patches of the Milky Way to depict mythical creatures spanning the dark skies.

The pristine skies of Chile and the exquisite instruments stationed across the Atacama and the Andes combine to make this the prime location on Earth for studying the Universe and understanding our place within it.

**Windows**

by Barbara Orbock

I sketch windows.
Old world, new world—
Windows intrigue me. They have stories,
As many stories as owners—
Stories that are secreted within
That I can never really know.
Yet as I draw—I wonder.

Who has lived here and peered out?
Who has passed by and peered in?
Were lives within happy or forlorn,
Filled with love, remorse, or hate?
Were the passersby curious
Or envious—or blind?
Were they friends or foes

Or just indifferent folk?
Some windows sparkle,
Preserved and proud,
But others only weep
For better times.
Some windows have no panes
Shutters sag, are fastened shut.
No sunlight enters—
And they see no more.

I sketch these windows
And as I do
I hear children laugh,
Parents cry, lovers fight.
I learn the secrets,
Curses and regrets.
I reconstruct the lives
Even if they’re gone.

**The Donald and I**

by Paul Stolley, MD

The entry of Mr. Donald Trump into the race for the Republican nominee for President brought back a memory from about 25 years ago.

When the Eastern Airlines air shuttle from NYC to Boston was purchased by Mr. Trump, it was renamed the Trump Shuttle and the airplanes had the name TRUMP on the side of the aircraft. The Shuttle operated under the Trump name from 1989 to 1992.
On a certain Tuesday I caught the Trump Shuttle from Boston to NYC on an early morning flight. We were five minutes in the air when I heard an announcement, “If there is a physician on board will that doctor please raise a hand as we need medical assistance.” I immediately identified myself as a doctor and the stewardess ushered me to the rear of the aircraft where a pale, middle-aged man was sitting, clutching his chest and grimacing in pain.

I took a medical history and learned he had coronary heart disease with angina pectoris but now the chest pain he had was severe and constant. His pulse was rapid and after more questioning I decided he probably had an acute myocardial infarction (heart attack) and asked the stewardess to have the pilot radio ahead to LaGuardia airport to arrange an emergency cart to greet him on arrival and to call an ambulance.

I chatted with the man and reassured him that help would await him on landing and to call an ambulance.

Arriving at LaGuardia airport the emergency medical team was not there and I waited with the gentleman for about 20 minutes until it arrived. I conveyed the information I had gained to the paramedics and departed. I never learned the outcome and eventually forgot the matter.

About six months after the episode I received a phone call at work from “the secretary of Mr. Donald Trump.” The woman had a plummy English accent (was it the Queen?) and she told me that Mr. Trump had recently reviewed the pilot logs of his shuttle and noticed I had rendered assistance to one of the passengers, was very grateful and wished to send me a gift of appreciation. She took down my mailing address, thanked me on behalf of Mr. Trump and told me to expect a package from Mr. Trump very soon.

I returned home and told my wife about the call and she thought we might expect a certificate for free travel on the shuttle or perhaps a Rolex. After all, the man was a billionaire.

Two days later a package arrived from Trump Enterprises. I eagerly opened it up and found a small, cylinder-shaped box in an elegant container. Opening the box I found a plastic ballpoint pen with the label TRUMP SHUTTLE engraved in the cheap plastic. A note enclosed read “Compliments of Mr. Donald Trump.” The pen broke within two weeks after receipt.

In the hierarchy of Trump-thought I reckoned myself a “loser” in the transaction.

Otherwise, You’d Be Dead
by Joe Krebs

The feeling of freedom, flying almost, down a country road, the fall crisp air in my face, the smells, the silence, the rhythmic pedaling an deep breathing—everything I love about cycling.

On Sunday morning, November 14, 1999, soon after 11 o’clock, I was heading north on country roads towards Mount Airy about 15 miles away. I hoped to go out and back for a ride of 30 miles, two-and-a-half to three hours.

The day was perfect for biking—temperature in the mid-50s, the sun shining, and all around, the contrasting beauty of the outdoors. To my left, the woody odor of dry leaves that covered the lawns and to my right, the distinctive stink left by the cows grazing in the fields. I reveled in the freshness that filled my lungs.
And I reveled in the release from the worries of work. I had spent the morning sitting in front of my computer, writing the script for a story that had to be editted the next day—one segment of a five-part feature on the renovation of a kitchen. My story, embarrassing to the contractor, described the installation of a granite countertop that replaced another one that had been measured incorrectly and didn’t fit. I knew the contractor would be unhappy that I focused on his mistake even though I showed how quickly he corrected it. I was dreading his feedback.

The road dipped down through a tunnel-like canopy of trees before climbing up and then down again to a one-lane bridge across a small creek, and, after that, an easy, slow climb past woods on the right. As I slowed I realized, ah, yes, it’s the quiet I love, the quiet and the smells—grass, trees, weeds, and leaves. And I love this machine, this bike, my metallic red, 1980 Miyata 1000, now 19 years old. We had covered many hundreds of miles together. It’s so simple. You pedal, you move. No motor. No fuel except that which you eat and drink. That’s part of the joy.

I turned left and got ready for another long fast flying ride downhill to cross the small bridge over the creek-like beginnings of the Patuxent River and another long uphill ending with a short, but very steep, climb to a crossroad. At the top, I was breathing hard, huffing and puffing, and felt a burn in my chest—my lungs, probably—the kind of burning I’ve felt before while exercising outside on a cold winter day.

And what a gorgeous day it was! Sunshine, cool enough that I was still wearing my windbreaker, and now I was in horse country, beautiful white fences framing squares of perfect pasture. I turned left and rode for five more miles and turned around. Just before 12:30 and I was halfway through my planned 30-mile ride.

A nice downhill, sweeping curve at the start of my return and then a long flat stretch. I picked up some speed—steady cadence in a medium-high gear. I felt like I was soaring. Delightful. More farms—horse farms, sod farms, corn farms—beautiful expanses of green and brown. I was giddy with the joy of the outdoors. Everything was wonderful—except for this burning sensation—in my stomach?—that began to feel more like indigestion.

The previous night, my wife, Mary Lynne, and I had eaten at an Italian restaurant. My penne arrabbiata did not agree with me. In fact, it was downright angry (“arrabbiata” in Italian) with me all night. And the pistachio ice cream may not have helped. By morning, I felt fine.

Now, though, my right arm was aching. As I rode, I began to hear the sound of an NBC4 promo running in my head.

“Do you know the symptoms of a heart attack?”

The announcer was asking questions to promote a series of reports coming up on Channel 4 this week.

“Do you feel a crushing pain in your chest?”

No, I thought, I don’t feel anything like a “crushing” pain. It’s a “burning” pain.

“Do you feel pain in your left arm, in your back?”

And no, I thought, I don’t have a pain in my left arm. It’s in my right arm.

Plus, I was starting to feel nauseated, a sick feeling that gave me comfort. I probably really did have indigestion caused by last night’s meal.

As I reached the 20-mile mark, shortly before 1 o’clock, the growing nausea caused me to consider calling home on my cell phone. I turned onto the top of a steep hill and, since it was a long, fast ride down, I decided to wait. Holding on and concentrating for the fastest part of the ride, I hit 30 m.p.h., crossed the bridge over the Patuxent, and began the long slow climb out of the river valley. When I reached the top, I felt like I had to throw up. I stopped, got off my bike, laid it on the ground, and tried to vomit but couldn’t. As I was about to get back on my bike, another cyclist came by and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said.

I thought, I’m sure it’s just an upset stomach. I just need to get home.
I started riding again, but, within a hundred yards, a wave of nausea hit me again. I stopped, hopped off the bike, let it fall, and heaved my guts into the drainage ditch. The same thing happened after another quarter mile and again after I turned left. I felt like hell. I pulled out my phone and called home.

I heard my daughter Emily’s voice, “This is the Krebs residence, thank you for calling. We are unable to come to the phone right now...”

I knew neither of my daughters was at home. Emily was working in Boston and Anna was at college in New York, but I was hoping Mary Lynne was there. So, standing alongside the road astride my bike, I dialed a couple of more times but, still, only reached the answering machine.

I left a message: “Hi Honey, I’m still out on my ride, but I’m not feeling well. I feel pretty nauseated. So, if you get this message, call me back. I might want you to come pick me up.”

The burning pain in my chest and the ache in my arm were worse. I felt weaker, especially in my right arm.

Since I was at the top of a gradual hill, I clipped my shoes back into the pedals, lifted myself onto the seat, and coasted down a long stretch, past the woods on the left and a beautiful modern ranch home up on a hill on the right. The property was surrounded by acres of golf course quality green lawn.

I crossed the single-lane bridge and began another long climb uphill. I made it about halfway up but had to stop. Under a big tree on the right, I dry heaved two or three more times I called home again. And again. And, on the third try, Mary Lynne answered. She had been on the phone with both of our daughters.

“I don’t know.” But I was extremely uncomfortable and getting scared. I said, “If we pass a firehouse, maybe we ought to stop.” I was thinking that the EMTs would know what to do.

Mary Lynne was scared and thinking, too. She started to speed, hoping that a cop might pull us over and help.

About 10 minutes later, she pulled up to the emergency entrance, stopped in front of the door, we both got out, walked in, and found a long line of patients waiting. Mary Lynne pointed at me and spoke up loudly to the receptionist, “I think it might be his heart.”

The receptionist got up immediately, came around the desk, and took me towards a room marked “Triage.”

A nurse saw me coming and said without hesitation, “Follow me,” while Mary Lynne stayed behind to register.

The nurse led me through the emergency room, past several patients, to a curtained area where she motioned me to sit on the bed, helped me take off my yellow jacket and cycling jersey, put an oxygen tube in my nose, and a nitroglycerin pill in my mouth. A team of technicians, nurses, and, eventually doctors swooped in and swung into action, starting IV lines and sticking electrodes on my chest for an EKG. The first nurse asked me to describe my pain on a scale of one-to-10, one being no pain, 10 being the worst pain.

I thought, “Well it’s bad, but is it really the worst?”

I said, “I guess about a six.”

The ER doctor looked at the EKG results and barked out orders for medication. He then sat down on a stool at the end of my bed, crossed his legs, and said,
“Mr. Krebs, the EKG shows that you are having a heart attack.”

“As we speak?” I said, thinking that a heart attack was sudden—an attack, a “bam!”—like a punch, and it was over.

“As we speak,” he said and explained that the medications were designed to break up the blockage that was stopping the blood flow in the heart.

He told me to let him know when the pain went away.

I said, “I think I’d like to put the pain level at about an eight rather than a six.”

The cardiologist on call for this Sunday afternoon came into the emergency room, introduced himself, asked how I felt, and, quickly ordered new medications. He said, “We’re using some pretty powerful stuff to dissolve the clot. We hope it’ll work soon. Or we may have to go into emergency surgery.”

Mary Lynne was sitting on a chair at the foot of the bed. She was quiet, but her eyes were welled up with tears. I had not felt in danger before, but, now, I realized that this is a big deal. This might not end well.

“How will we know if this medication works?” I asked.

“Oh, you’ll know,” he said.

I watched the doctors as they watched the monitors above and behind me. They were unsmiling, intent on whatever they were seeing. Then, minutes later, I felt a sudden release—like a flushing drain—and their looks of concern melted into smiles—at the same moment the pains in my chest and my arm melted away completely.

I felt fine. In fact, I felt fixed, ready to walk out and go home and forget this ever happened.

“No, you just dodged a major bullet,” the cardiologist said. “You’ll be in the ICU for several days, and, after that, we might have to put a stent into your artery.”

The next morning, another cardiologist came in to see me and sat beside the bed.

I asked, “What do I do now?”

“Stop smoking,” he said.

“I don’t smoke. I did, very sporadically, 20 years ago, certainly less than a pack a month.”

“Well, then, watch what you eat and get plenty of exercise,” he said.

I explained that my father had suffered heart attacks in his 40s, in his 50s, and probably died from one at 74. But he had smoked a lot before his first heart attack and had not exercised like I had.

“I do watch what I eat, lots of fruits and vegetables, not much meat. I ride my bike or swim several times a week. I swam across the Chesapeake Bay several years ago. I’ve done several hundred-mile bike rides. I don’t understand. I thought I was doing everything you’re supposed to do to avoid a heart attack.”

He looked at me and succinctly summed up the situation, “If you weren’t doing those things, you probably would have had a heart attack 10 years ago and you’d be dead.”

Close Guantanamo!
by Mary Smith

Guantanamo Detention Center has always been a questionable solution to the problem of what to do with the suspected terrorists that the CIA and the FBI brought in for questioning and detained after the horror of the 9/11 attack. Now, in 2015, we still have 114 detainees in Guantanamo. According to the editorial in The New York Times on September 20, 2015, 53 men have been cleared for release, 10 prisoners have been convicted in military tribunals or have cases pending, and 52 have never been charged with a crime and have no path to freedom or due process.

For me, this indefensible, indefinite detention was brought into vivid focus when I read Guantanamo Diary by Mohamedou Ould Slahi, one of the 52 detainees who have not been charged with a crime. His book is a heart-rending, factual account of his interrogation, torture, and physical abuse over a period
from November, 2001 until sometime late in 2004. The introduction to the diary is written by Larry Siems, who confirms the accuracy of the diary as reported in the official records of the interrogations, which were declassified in 2010. Slahi’s account is not written in anger or bitterness. There is both humor and sadness in what he writes, but the reader empathizes with the injustice of his imprisonment and of others like him at Guantanamo.

Here, briefly, is his story: Mohamedou Slahi is a Mauritanian who had memorized the Koran by the time he was in high school. He was a bright student with an aptitude for mathematics, and he received a scholarship to attend university in Germany. During his time at the university, he made two trips to Afghanistan to volunteer with al-Qaeda to fight against the communist government that was not allowing his fellow Muslims to practice their religion. As we know, at that time al-Qaeda was fighting on the side of the Americans against the Russians. When the Russians were defeated, and the Afghans began fighting among themselves for power, he returned to Germany and completed his degree in electrical engineering. He worked in Germany for several years, but in November 1999, unable to get permanent residency in Germany, he moved to Montreal, Canada. At that time an Algerian was arrested entering the United States with a car full of explosives and a plan to bomb the LA International Airport. The Algerian had left Montreal before Slahi arrived, but the CIA tried to link him in some way to the plot. Slahi did not like being watched, and since he hadn’t found work, he decided to return to Mauritania. He was taken in and interrogated for several days by both the Mauritanian police and the CIA. He was released by the Mauritanian Government saying they had no reason to believe he was involved in the Millennium Plot.

From 2000 until September 29, 2001 he lived a normal and very successful life doing computer and electronics work in Mauritania. After the 9/11 attacks, the police with the support of the CIA returned to his house and asked him to come in for questioning. He agreed. Driving himself to the station, he describes looking back at his mother and aunt waving to him. That was the last time he saw his mother; she died in 2013. The diary begins with his capture in Mauritania, his flight to Amman, Jordan, and a few weeks later to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, and then to Guantanamo. For the family, he had just disappeared. They thought he was in jail in Mauritania until his younger brother, who was now living in Germany, saw in an article in Der Spiegel that his brother had been sitting in Guantanamo prison for months.

In late 2004, he finally met with his pro bono legal team, Nancy Hollander and Sylvia Royce, and in 2005 he applied for a writ of habeas corpus. Finally, in 2010, Judge James Robertson reviewed his request and ruled that Mohamedou should be released. The administration filed a notice of appeal and the DC Court of Appeals sent his habeas corpus case back to US district court for rehearing. That case is still pending. Now in January, 2016, 14 years after he was captured in Mauritania, he remains in Guantanamo. On September 18, 2015, the brother who lives in Germany
wrote an open letter to President Obama, printed in the *NY Times*, requesting his brother’s release, stating, “There is torture, too, in not knowing if or when an unjust imprisonment will end.”

How can we keep a person in prison without any accusation of what he has done? To keep him in detention is morally wrong. It is un-American. It damages our standing in the world. As Scott Shane points out in a *NY Times Magazine* article, “When Islamic State executioners dressed American Journalists in orange jumpsuits before beheading them, it is hard to miss the reference.” As a country of laws, I believe we are morally corrupt unless and until we take action to close Guantanamo.

**The Flock**
**by Betty Spears**

One day a flamingo flock, genus *phoenicopteridae*, took up residence at the corner of South and Wexford roads. These birds, an extremely rare species, *Litho penna*, with amazing characteristics, settled in my neighbor’s yard. You have no idea what remarkable talents the rara avis possess. Straight unbending metal legs support bodies fashioned of pink polystyrene. They move about mysteriously, usually after dark and even send messages to the homeowners Dr. Brenda, OB-GYN and Max, Esq. This explanatory missive accompanied the dozen birds.

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Dear Brenda,

We just flew into town and we are homeless. Our last home was closed when all the birds were adopted or found their way home. Sadly, no one was attracted to us. Potential adopters said our legs are too skinny.

We heard about you through the Flamingo Flame. They said you are very kind to all animals but have a real soft spot for flamingos. They even had an affidavit signed by numerous sparrows, blue jays, squirrels, cats and chipmunks.
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The new residents caused a lot of consternation to the dog people and regular walkers in the community. One never knows how the flock might be arranged—maybe a circle or a straight line or just clumped together. The flock became an important part of the community. They spend winter in a garden shed, disappearing before Halloween and returning at Easter when they emerge from their winter quarters and slowly make their way to the front yard.

We first realized the uniqueness of these birds when on a sunny Easter morning Brenda found multicolored hollow plastic eggs at each bird’s feet. The eggs contained terse messages, e.g.: Flamingo
pink is better than mink ... Where in the hell is the pool you promised us? ... Where are our license tags? ... Whaja eggspect? Not all eggs get a sperm ... I am looking for a life partner ... The Baltimore Zoo made us an offer. Can you match it? ... Have you learned flamingo lingo?

The flock gradually became well known and popular in the neighborhood. A woman from Montana or one of the square states photographed the *litho pennae* every morning on her way to Starbuck’s. Her intent was to amuse her son, a long-term patient at Sinai Hospital, and her family back home. One often sees people snapping photos.

Another year brought fancy name tags as all *litho pennae* are identical. Most likely all hatched from the same egg. Now every bird has a name: Flossie, Freddie, Female, Freona, Fritz, Fallopia, Francis, Florette, Franklin, and Failura. Two others recently flew over the rainbow to avian heaven. They are sorely missed.

Casualties are common. At one point some spent time at the Betty Boop Fix-It Clinic where they underwent serious surgery receiving prostheses to replace lost or badly bent legs. Epoxy, wire mesh, and steel rods did the trick. This treatment was important because they often go on pilgrimages to neighboring yards either as a group or one per yard. On our block houses outnumber the flamingoes and one indignant resident accused Dr. Brenda of partiality since no big pink bird camped in her yard.

Designated god-mother is now my unofficial title and connection to the bunch of goofy birds. They visit my yard several times during warm weather. Before my trip to Spain they gathered at my door with neck tags saying adios and wishing me well.

Sadly, their inventor father, Donald Featherstone, died June 23, 2015. The flock mysteriously acquired black crepe ribbons around their necks. They faithfully kept them on for one month out of respect for their father.

Dere Doctor Brenda,

Today we are very sad becaze we read that our beloved father inventor has left this world and gone on to a better place.

We will morn for him for one week. After all, we wouldn’a been in this yard today if he had not designed and fashioned our older antecedence. Just think how much pleasure and laughter youse has had thanx to us. And, we are trulee greatfull for all the nice things you do for us.

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts,

Cinsearly,

The Flock

Despite a lot of uncanny abilities and strong desire for babies they can’t seem to propagate. These letters express their disappointment.

Dere Doctor Brenda,

Here we are back from hibernation. We had a good enuf winter but the accomodashuns leave much to be desired! We were really cold an scared when all that snow came down. You ought to know that’s not flamingo weather.
Anyway we snuggled together as much as we could and hoped for some babies but alas, even tho you advised us last year, this is what we produced. There must be some flamingo jeans someplace but they got really screwed up. What can we do? Maybe Carol Emerson can help us.

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We tried to keep busy while we hibernated in your shed and we expected lots of babies to show off. Something happened to our reproductive systems so our eggs are kinda weird. We’re thinking you can solve the problem since you’re in the baby business.

From a rabbit family:

Hoppy Easter!!! We are so glad to be back in your world. While those flaky birds tried all winter to make babies, our mom & dad were really going at it under the shed and now here we are: Lopsy, Chopsy and Topsy.

And observe that egg. No wonder it didn’t hatch. That is surely a no brainer. Maybe you ought to give them some fertilizer drugs then they might. Have bunny babies instead of flamingoes.

Well that’s your problem not ours. We bet our mom will be enceinte again before that troop completes their spring trek to the front yard.

Luv ya,

Lopsy, Chopsy & Topsy and oh yes, those F-birds who can’t even write.

Most letters come on Easter just as the birds emerge from their winter quarters. Their worry is not just about babies, they have other concerns, too.

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Happy Easter

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We ordered scarves and castanets from Flamenco por Flamingoes on line but they say our credit is bad. We had to pay our income tax so we’re short of cash. How about an advance on our allowance? We want to entertain at the Block Party.

P.S. We think living in Marilyn makes us sterile. Still no babies. Can’t you please help?

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… It’s Easter and we’re still hyvernating. Don’t you know we knead Vitamin Dee? We hop to see you sune.

Our cousin Daphne Ducque is bringing this to you.

Luv, The Forlorn Forgotten Flock

There you have it—a crazy story of some silly people who quite by chance created a neighborhood attraction and legend that lives on from year to year. The special litho pennae elicit smiles from passers-by and queries when the flock is out of sight and anonymous notes attesting to their amusement and requesting they not be removed. Anyone interested in starting a Flamingo Farm may go to www.fancyfeatherflams@avis.org.
GVPT 899: Chameleonics

by Charles E. Sternheim

For advanced students who aspire to positions of power and leadership within government that require active campaigning for voter support.

Master the science of expedient, facile changes in ideas and character.

Learn to match promises to the color of the day.

Train your convictions to fall over and play dead, like possums to an unexpected threat.

By semester’s end conceal inconvenient truths as well as a cowbird who hides her eggs in other birds’ nests.

Textbooks: The Folly of Fools by Robert Trivers and How to Lie With Statistics by Darrell Huff and Irving Geis.

Note: Not open to students who have received credit for GVPT 799, Winning At All Costs.

My Life-Changing Journey: Pay It Forward

by Edith Kaplan

My husband Robert Kaplan died in January 2014 after a nine-year battle with (probably) Lewy body dementia. For New York State residents, there exists among physicians and nursing home professionals the pervasive practice of overmedication.

Our experience was not unique. My husband progressed through the familiar phases of dementia, including despair and rage. He was given Risperdal, which caused him to collapse after two days, and he never came home after that. He was admitted to the hospital and then rehab as he could not walk or eat.

People with suspected Lewy body dementia often suffer adverse reactions to psychotropic drugs, and yet those very medications are prescribed again and again, without regard to side effects and undesirable responses.

Fortunately, we were able to admit him to Johns Hopkins Hospital, where the team evaluated him and agreed that he could not tolerate psychotropic
medications. They taught us how to help him with music and quiet time instead of drugs. Even though there were many nursing homes near our home in Smithtown, New York, not one would take him without those drugs. Finally, the team of doctors at Hopkins sent him to a nursing home in Maryland, where he was safe.

I rented a small apartment within walking distance to the nursing home so that I could be there every day. During the remaining four and a half years, he played his clarinet, went to concerts at Strathmore with me, went swimming at Rockville Swim Center every week, and came home every weekend. His music gave him peace. When he could no longer play the clarinet, we played classical music and jazz even when he dozed. It made a difference. As he lost his speech, he could still wave his arms and whistle to the music.

To honor my husband’s memory as a caring physician, I find it necessary to publish the danger of overmedicating people with dementia. I hope to pay it forward to help other families.

A Tribute to Bob Thomason: The Novel in Verse

by Karen Primack

For the past seven years at Osher, my life has been enriched most by Bob Thomason, who taught great literature at a leisurely pace. The novels—from Moby Dick and Don Quixote to War and Peace and Middlemarch—took me to the core. And I never could have gotten through certain ones, like Joyce’s Ulysses or Proust’s Swann’s Way, without him. Also, the pace allowed time for Thomason’s famous “diversions” into his outside readings and life experiences. From these, I wrote down many words of wisdom and compiled a list of more than 30 recommendations of classics and newer works to last me for many years to come. Bob Thomason passed away on December 3, 2015, and his students already miss him terribly.

A few years ago my husband Aron and I took Thomason’s course on Pushkin. We loved all of it, but especially Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, the first novel in verse we had ever read.

Pushkin (1799–1837) has been touted as Russia’s Shakespeare, Dante, or Goethe. His novel Eugene Onegin concerns an arrogant, urbane socialite who moves from St. Petersburg to the countryside when he inherits his uncle’s estate. Out of boredom, he heartlessly woos his sensitive young neighbor, Tatiana, and kills his best friend, the romantic poet Lensky, in a duel. (Not so unusual—Pushkin himself was mortally wounded in a duel.) Eugene goes abroad while Tatiana goes to the big city to find a husband. Years later the two are reunited at a ball in St. Petersburg, but Tatiana, now married and socially prominent, has no time for the fawning Eugene.

Pushkin wrote Eugene Onegin in sonnet form in iambic tetrameter (eight-syllable lines, each with four “feet” or stressed syllables). It is, of course, written in the Russian language. So, one may ask, how can one appreciate the majesty of his intricate rhyme and meter pattern in translation?

In the forward to his 1963 translation of Eugene Onegin, Vladimir Nabokov declares that retaining the rhyme scheme while translating literally is “mathematically impossible.” He opts for a fairly faithful translation that reads like free verse, without rhyme or meter. So, for example, here is his translation of Chapter 1, Stanza 4, concerning Eugene’s upbringing and coming of age:
Then, when tumultuous youth’s Season for Eugene came, Season of hopes and tender melancholy, Monsieur was ousted from the place. Now my Onegin is at large; Hair cut after the latest fashion, Dressed like a London Dandy— And finally he saw the world. In French impeccably He could express himself and write, Danced the mazurka lightly, And bowed unconstrainedly— What would you more? The World decided He was clever and very nice.

Fortunately, Bob Thomason selected for our course a poetic, less literal translation in the Penguin Classics series by Stanley Mitchell. This version preserves Pushkin’s unique meter and rhyme scheme. Here is the same stanza in Stanley Mitchell’s rendition, in the form of a “Pushkin Sonnet”:

But when young Eugene reached the morrow Of adolescent turbulence, Season of hopes and tender sorrow, Monsieur was straightway driven hence. Behind my Eugene’s liberation: With hair trimmed to the latest fashion, Dressed like a London dandy, he At last saw high society.

In French, which he’d by now perfected, He could express himself and write, Dance the mazurka, treading light And bow in manner unaffected. What more? Society opined: Here was a youth with charm and mind.

We found Mitchell’s version a joy to read; it had the compelling story and the attention to historic detail, but also the energy of the meter and rhyme.

A couple of years later I bought Vikram Seth’s Golden Gate, a 1986 novel in “Pushkin Sonnet” form that had been mentioned in the introduction to Mitchell’s Onegin. The Calcutta-born Seth, while doing research for his economics dissertation at Stanford, picked up a copy of Eugene Onegin in a bookstore and became engrossed in Pushkin’s meter. The result was his novel, composed of 590 sonnets, set in San Francisco in the 1980s.

Characters include a computer nerd, a lawyer, a sculptor, peace activists, and gay lovers. There are themes of love, isolation, marriage, nuclear weapons, religion, death, and sexual identity. There is a definite plot, which flies by as the reader engages with the rhythm of the verse. In Chapter 1, software engineer John complains to friend Jan over dinner:

“I’m young, employed, healthy, ambitious, Sound, solvent, self-made, self-possessed. But all my symptoms are pernicious. The Dow-Jones of my heart’s depressed. The sunflower of my youth is wilting. The tower of my dreams is tilting. The zoom lens of my zest is blurred. The drama of my life’s absurd.”
What is the root of my neurosis?
I jog, eat brewer’s yeast each day,
And yet I feel life slip away.
I wait your sapient diagnosis.
I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!”
“You need a lover, John, I think.”

Lest the iambic tetrameter become too sing-song, Seth makes skillful use of long sentences while maintaining the rhyme and meter, as in Chapter 7 at a disarmament rally:

Dawn rises over Lungless redly.
The pioneers of the blockade
Are joined now by a motley medley;
A marching carnival parade
Starts out from Lungless Park, cavorting
Along to Lungless Labs, supporting
Those who risk prison to defy
The weaponry they all decry.
Young couples, schoolchildren, grandmothers,
Old hippies, punks with hair dyed green,
Staid-suited men who’ve never seen
Another demonstration, others
Who’ve been to scores, walk hand in hand
Toward the place where death is planned.

Liz walks outside and murmurs, “Phil?”
He looks up, sees her. “If you’re making
Ambasorial goodwill
Gestures for John…,” Liz says, “I’m really
Here for myself—and I’m sincerely
Sorry, Phil— look, unlock this door—
Thanks… (Liz gets in)… I knew the score
A month ago.” Now Phil’s incredulous.
“That Ed…” “That you and Ed…” “You knew?
You mean, Ed spilled the beans to you?”
“You did, as well. Though fairly sedulous,
Sunday before the equinox
You both wore the same mismatched socks.”

Vikram Seth is probably better known for two later novels, *A Suitable Boy* and *An Equal Music*, but *Golden Gate* is a supreme first effort. It has convinced me to add a couple of items to my to-do list: Seek out other novels in verse, and track down a performance of Conrad Cummings’ opera version of *Golden Gate*

So, I thank you, Bob Thomason! You have enhanced my retirement and given me many treasures to pass down to the grandchildren.

The novel is serious but witty. This stanza from Chapter 9 discloses Liz’s discovery of Phil and Ed’s affair:

Head on the steering wheel, Phil’s shaking.
The Osher at JHU Journal, the newsletter of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Johns Hopkins University, is published under the auspices of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences two times per academic year.

Johns Hopkins University, Osher at JHU, 6740 Alexander Bell Drive, Columbia, MD 21046-2100, 410-516-9719.

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