




Words Matter

ELDER
PROJECT
ANTHOLOGY

LITQUAKE

Fall
2022

writing by
residents at the
San Francisco
Campus for
Jewish Living



About the Project

Litquake sparks critical conversations, and inspires writers and readers of all ages to celebrate the written word with diverse year-round literary programming, interactive workshops, and a ten-day festival.

Litquake's Elder Project is a literary arts project focused on creative expression through writing and performance.

Litquake brings teaching artists to the elders in a classroom accessible to them. The class allows students to discuss and record past and current life experiences, resulting in personal empowerment through creativity. The goal is for students to find new self-confidence using the creative process, writing, and performance as a means of generating a dialogue within and outside their own community. This is writing from Residents of the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living in summer and spring of 2022.

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Fredi Aks

Coming Out of My Shell

When I first came to Frank Residences, I was content to stay in my apartment arranging furniture, carefully storing mementos, getting the lay of the land so to speak. For two months, I self-isolated, using COVID as an excuse. It took me a while to work up the courage to go to a scheduled event, but when I visited the art studio, something happened. I saw people working diligently on paintings. There was a wide variation in their abilities but all were entirely engaged in their work, and I remember thinking, “This looks like something I could do.” The art teacher welcomed me warmly, and brought a full tray of colors and brushes. I began with

something “modern”—lots of colors and shapes in a simple design. I returned a couple of days later and grew a little bolder, doing a sparse landscape using a sponge to create the leaves on the trees. It was quite an awakening. I had not made any artwork since my days 50 years ago as a kindergarten teacher.

This revival spurred me on to other new pursuits. Within days, I attended my first creative writing class at Frank. It was run by Litquake, a San Francisco literary arts organization. What amazed me was that each person in the class wrote an entirely different paragraph from the same writing prompt. I so enjoyed listening to class members’ results from the weekly prompts, I returned for additional sessions even though I don’t personally enjoy writing! I

was amazed and amused at the cleverness and ability of the others in the class.

In short, the two activities actually changed my life here. Until I became engaged in these pursuits, I had remained in my apartment “cocoon,” unchallenged and oblivious to the opportunities available and the wealth of talent and creativity that exists inside these walls.

Going to the Fair

In 1998, my daughter invited us up from Los Angeles to San Francisco, where she lives. Her ultimate motive was to get us to decide to move here when we retired. When we arrived, she had a week’s worth of places to go and things to see all planned out. She took us to wonderful restaurants and to the Legion of Honor, the de Young, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,

and the Asian Art Museum. We were impressed. At the end of the week, she told us we were going to an outdoor fair that was unquestionably a San Francisco cultural event.

The sun was shining and the day was warm, so it seemed like a perfect end to the week. We set out for Folsom Street. In the distance we saw canvas-covered booths where, we thought, we could purchase a memento or two from our trip. As we got closer, we realized that the blocked-off thoroughfare was teeming with people who seemed to be in costume.

On closer inspection, we beheld men and women moving about in the street, some completely naked, some wearing extravagant wigs, some with hats of all descriptions and draped with nothing but

chains or feather boas. There were men with leather chaps hooked to belts around their waists, but no pants or shirts. There were nude women, some with sparkly high heels, G-strings, and breast pasties, looking ready to go on a burlesque stage. There were people pierced with safety pins, spikes, and hooks in ordinarily private body parts. As electronic music blasted from huge speakers, I regained my composure. I saw that in the booths there were, indeed, things for sale... whips and other leather and rubber fetish toys and tools, erotic magazines of every imaginable type, fishnet clothing, and body paint vividly advertised by the salespeople. It was apparent that the people here openly shared their most lurid fantasies in a public playground with no restrictions or rules. What I thought was a onetime festival of nudity was, I learned, an

annual occurrence for the clothing optional, erotic masses.

We felt more than a little out of place at the Folsom Street Fair, and I didn't find any mementos to purchase. It was an unforgettable experience, and did not dissuade us from making the move. We decided that San Francisco had room for and respected all types of people, including those of us who prefer to be outside fully clothed.

The Greenhorn

A photo of a man in a formal uniform, a hat perched above his bearded face. The uniform has embroidered fleurs-de-lis, but they do not soften the image. His eyes are steely, his gaze penetrating. He does not

smile. His jaw is clenched, perhaps from fear or anger or confusion. He is an immigrant coming to a new land. I am reminded of a story my mother told of an uncle who was arriving from Poland to Baltimore harbor. My mother, age 12, was the youngest in her family of 10, the one who spoke the best English, so she was sent across Baltimore to meet the uncle at the dock and escort him home to the family.

She was not happy about it at all, and when she saw him dressed in his old-country green uniform, she was utterly embarrassed to walk alongside the “greenhorn.” It was a long walk. She walked so fast that he had to hurry to keep up with her. In Polish he said to her, “Teach me something English to say to them.”

All the way home, she taught him the same phrase, practicing it over and over so that his English sounded good. She taught him to remove his hat and bow at the waist with one hand behind his back when he said his phrase. She told him that was the polite way to say it. By the time they got up the marble steps and to the front door, he was very excited, and she stood just behind him as he knocked. After several seconds, the door opened, and my grandmother greeted her brother. As he had been instructed, he lifted his hat with a flourish, bowed low, and exclaimed with a big smile and in almost perfect English, “Good morning, you son of a bitch!”

My mother instantly ran as fast as she could to the end of the block and did not return home until after the dinner hour. She received no supper and a scolding from both

her parents, and the uncle scowled from his distance in the parlor. She was not asked to accompany any further immigrants from the dock.

Esther Mugar

A Delicious Memory

I am 10 years old. Today my father and I brought my mother to a Manhattan pier where a big ship waited to carry her and her sisters across the ocean to visit family on the isle of their birth.

Afterward, it's lunchtime, and my father wants the meal to be special. Our destination has to be the Horn & Hardart Automat on 42nd Street, just across from Grand Central Station. Beyond a maze of tables is a wall fitted with small glass paneled doors. Behind each is a scrumptious delight, individually portioned on a tiny shelf. Deposit your coins to open the door and retrieve your treasure, perfectly cooked

and served at the correct temperature. As you close the door and return to your table, the shelf revolves, magically replenishing the dish. I choose the baked beans cooked in a thick ceramic bowl, steamy hot with succulent chunks of pork and a savory sauce; the best ever. For dessert a wedge of lemon meringue pie: a crumbly crust and a perfect layer of not-too-sweet lemon filling topped with peaks of whipped meringue, light but very satisfying. I am content all the way home on the long subway ride, nestled up against my dad.

St. Peter, Is That You?

The highlands of Scotland are picture perfect under clear skies and bright sun, but when the fog forms at ground level, all that remains is damp and bone-chilling cold

against a gray backdrop. So it was on that Sunday morning in May.

I was hitchhiking south, making my way to Edinburgh. Not many cars. The few that passed were stuffed with families making their way to church. I waited. After an hour I couldn't feel my feet anymore and my hopes of relief began to fade. Not a house or shop anywhere near, just endless hills. When I was ready to give up and die, a hearse came through the mist and pulled up. Was this St. Peter come to collect me? The driver lowered his window and said, "You can either ride up here with me or back there with him." I gratefully climbed into the passenger seat, where hot air began to thaw me out.

The driver was transporting back to Edinburgh the body of a boy who had

drowned at summer camp. I pitied the boy's family but rejoiced in my own good fortune. We made our way south, stopping at nearly every pub en route. By then I had learned that pubs served orange juice, so while the driver was fortifying himself with spirits, I got my daily dose of vitamin C. It was a lovely ride, warm and entertaining once I learned to decipher the driver's rich northern brogue. By evening I had reached my destination.

Date Night in the Inner City

When I moved to San Francisco I didn't know the city or anyone in it, so I took a room at the Ansonia, a residence club on Post Street for 21-35 year-olds. Most, like me, were new arrivals in this summer of '67; young, curious, and open to all things San Francisco.

One of my first friends was Jeff, a first-year law student with a quirky disposition. We had a standing Wednesday evening date for which we alternated in choosing a destination that would impress the other. One night we walked down to Market Street to a second-story pool hall above an adult theater. As we climbed the narrow stairway the aroma of stale beer and stale sweat grew stronger. The clientele were all men, grizzled and slightly seedy. Jeff was cool, and secured us a table without reacting to the environment. We had both played a bit in the past so we didn't embarrass ourselves hopelessly. The game was fun and we were totally into it. The regulars kept an eye on us and, in time, a few drifted over to watch, even offering advice on a tough shot. By the time we left, we were all laughing together.

Rhoda Sakowitz

Nathan's in Winter

The atmosphere was melancholy—the mood quiet as cold wind wafted by, the smell of hot dogs smeared with mustard and sauerkraut. We shifted inside our coats and lost ourselves in the crowd of people we had not known before. We waited in the cold with shifting feet and rising anticipation as we moved closer to the intense warmth of hot dogs on a hot stove.

Cool air whipped around us as we took a bite. Salty ocean air surrounded us.
Delight!

Michael Thaler

A Hole in the Wall

We don't get to choose our beginnings, but we can identify turning points along the way. I can say, "That day I emerged from a hole in a wall, gifted with new life that has continued to this day." It was an actual hole in the foundational wall of a prison fortress built in the mid-17th century by invading Turks at the crossroads of an obscure town in what was Eastern Poland before World War II, and is now Western Ukraine. The war brought the area under occupation, first by Russians, then by Germans. In every town, the dreaded Gestapo (the German secret police) set up ghettos that locked in the Jewish population. During their brief tenure of three years, these henchmen and their

helpers murdered all but a handful of Jews who found “a hole in the wall” and managed to escape.

The cellar of the fortress reeked of coal dust, mold, and urine accumulated in the airless space during centuries of use and abuse, but to us kids of the ghetto, the dungeon smelled of risk and reward, death that was familiar, and freedom that was new and wonderful. Most of all, we had an important part in sustaining life in the sealed ghetto: our parents now depended on us, not the other way around. Working as a gang sworn to secrecy, we managed to loosen a stone in the wall that separated the cellar from an alley, opening a child-sized passage to the world outside the ghetto. Wriggling our thin bodies through the hole in the wall, we smuggled out wedding rings left behind by deported couples, dime-sized

gold coins bearing the Tsar's jowly profile, and once in a while a diamond bracelet pried loose from the bony fingers of a starving dowager. In return, we brought into the ghetto sacks of wrinkled potatoes, half-baked bread spiked with sawdust and even, on a rare occasion, a bottle of milk still warm from the milking.

At the time of which I speak, the population of the ghetto had shrunk from approximately 4,000 to about half that number, reduced by deportations to an unknown destination that turned out to be the death camp of Belzec. Between the roundups, people were shot in the streets for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or arrested for wearing the white armband with the blue star too low on the arm or too wrinkled. When the prison filled up, the incarcerated were marched to the

old Jewish cemetery, ordered to dig a large opening in the ground, forced to undress, and shot at the edge of the new grave.

My father had been taken to a slave labor camp near the former Russian–Polish border, and his fate was unknown but predictable. Mother heard rumors that the ghetto in a neighboring town had been “liquidated,” and her sister, her husband, and their two daughters presumed dead. Mother felt our ghetto would be next, but she knew of no way of escaping. At that moment I decided to break the oath to secrecy about the hole in the wall. “No problem,” I told my mother. She followed me that night into the cellar of the ancient prison and helped with moving the loose stone out of the opening by the light of a

candle. “As long as you can fit through that hole, we’ll get out,” I assured her. She barely did scrape through, bruised and bleeding without the protection of her overcoat, and we headed through the night toward the forest.

Four days after our escape, on July 12, 1943, armored vehicles surrounded the ghetto, and the remaining Jews of the town were rounded up, marched to the old Jewish cemetery, and shot.

Now I stand again before the ancient Turkish prison, this time with my two children. The rock is still inserted in the cellar wall like a loose tooth. It is the only trace of the ghetto and its inhabitants. But it is the place where I was born again—as were those who came after.

Free Lunch

I met Andrée Belanger when we worked summer jobs at the Banff Springs Hotel, the jewel among the super-chalets owned by the Canadian Pacific Railroad that decorate the Rocky Mountains like castles along the Rhine. Andrée was charming and totally French. Her looks and cute accent got her a cozy job in a tight-fitting gold lamé dress guests could gawk at while she ran the front elevator; I labored as a lowly busboy in the ornate and exorbitantly priced Alhambra dining room, a slave to imported waiters who sported spotless white uniforms and harsh Germanic accents. Despite my low status in the hotel's pecking order, Andrée and I became close companions. On our rare days off, we hiked the valleys, climbed the surrounding peaks, and shared leftover hamburgers and hot pea

soup in the staff cafeteria when we returned exhausted in the evening.

This idyllic situation ended abruptly one month into the summer, when it became obvious that the pittance in tips the waiters threw at the busboys would barely cover my trip home. I traded in my culinary career at the hotel for the night shift on a crew that dynamited a path through the Rockies for the forthcoming Trans-Canada highway. With time-and-a-half for overtime I earned seven times as much as a busboy; the best part of the job was I was free to visit Andrée on the mornings she had off.

Visiting the hotel premises after you quit your job could get you into serious trouble; unauthorized lounging in the cafeteria was a well-advertised offence

punishable with jail time for a flock of cooked-up offences intended to keep students from leaving before the end of the tourist season. Needless to say, my Teutonic bosses regarded quitting the Alhambra in midseason a criminal act worthy of capital punishment. Sure enough, in a moment of lapsed vigilance barely into the second week of my convenient new arrangement, I was discovered by the CPR goons as I shared a bagel with a sleepy Andrée early in the morning near the golf course. I was lifted by the armpits, carried to a paddy wagon, and conveyed to the jail in beautiful downtown Banff.

As he locked the iron gate behind me, the jailer indicated that a judge would render a verdict based on the testimony of the arresting CPR officers and any available witnesses (Andrée?!). He added,

offhandedly, “The judge might also listen to your side of the story.” He had already turned down the dimly lit corridor when it occurred to me to shout after his retreating silhouette, “When will the judge render the verdict?” Back came a snicker, “Sometime this afternoon, if you’re lucky!”

“Luck be my lady tonight,” said a hoarse voice apparently mimicking the jailer from a bunk in the dim interior of the cell. A disheveled, bearded figure sat up, belched and farted. His bloodshot eyes followed my progress. “Mon Dieu, quel petit horreur!” emerged in a thick Quebecois accent. “Un veritable prince!”

“What are you in for?” I shot back, challenging my companion in English.

“Sleeping in the railway station,” shrugged the vagrant. “Et tu?” he inquired.

“I guess the charge’s going to be trespassing, breaking and entering,” I recited, trying to impress the vagrant with my criminal credentials. “Possibly theft.” As I disclosed this last item, the enormity of doing time and losing my new job at last dawned on me. “I need some rest,” I stammered, cutting off the conversation. I slumped on my bunk, not daring to fall asleep.

Footsteps in the corridor brought me to my feet around noon. The jailer reappeared bearing two worn plastic trays, each with a bowl of hot soup and an egg sandwich. He had barely pushed the trays through the bars at the bottom of the gate when the suddenly energized Quebecois leaped from his bunk, threw a pair of tattooed arms around the nearest tray, and attacked the soup with loud sucking sounds.

I sat down with my tray on my bunk and observed my companion wolf down his lunch. The sulfurous smell of scrambled eggs brought on a wave of nausea and I felt my stomach contract. He finished and pushed the empty tray through the gate. Noticing my slumped posture, he exclaimed, “Quoi? Not eating?” “I’m... I’m not hungry,” I stammered. “Do you want my lunch?”

“Bien sûr!” he said, smiling through a row of crooked yellow teeth. He seized my tray and, as if sharing a deep truth, paused to say, “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

I looked up at him, irritated. “What do you mean, beggars?”

As he swallowed my soup, the vagrant shook his matted locks in fake disbelief at

my enormous naivete. “There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” he declared.

“Except in jail, it seems,” I shot back.

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” he countered. Especially if he’s got teeth like yours, I thought, but kept still. A bell rang, and the vagrant jumped up again, crossing himself. “Here comes the judge.”

Janet Underwood

The Talk Shop

It was the summer between college years. I worked in Greenwich Village in a jewelry store that was called The Talk Shop because they also sold unusual telephones. I knew nothing about jewelry, especially the Yemenite jewelry sold there, and even less about the unique telephones the store was named after. I was hired anyway. I liked the idea that the shop was in Greenwich Village, because my boyfriend lived on the Lower East Side. I still had to go home to Long Island every night, but sometimes I stayed in the city for the weekend.

The owner of the store, an incredibly talented jewelry maker from Yemen, wanted

me to call him Abba, which means “father” in Hebrew. He was a very old man who smoked excessively and worked upstairs in a tiny niche, where he made all his intricate jewelry. Whenever there was a question or a need to finalize an order, I had to climb the narrow stairs to where Abba worked.

Once, when I went upstairs, Abba put his hand on my behind. I brushed it aside. I developed a fear about going upstairs. Another time when I climbed the winding staircase and presented a piece of jewelry to Abba, he again put his hand on my behind. He said, “Let me touch you anywhere I want,” and offered me money. I said “No!” and ran down the stairs.

Abba’s daughter, who came by often, had wanted Abba to hire a more mature and experienced person to manage the store.

She had wanted me fired, but Abba, always thinking he would eventually have his way with me, would not oblige. But now that he saw that I would not let him touch me, he listened to his daughter and told me the restaurant next door needed a waitress, and I should go there and apply. I did, and they hired me.

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