

Jan. 31, 1980

Dear Sylvia; At long last I am getting around to sending my last Christmas card. Ever since I got your very welcome card with its charming "snow lions" (surely more Tibetan than Indian in inspiration, as the artist's name confirms), I have meant to answer it immediately--and this is the result: procrastination for more than a month. I can't excuse it by claiming that other obligations have taken up my time, for as you know, I really have none at all here aside from housekeeping duties. (Tuesday, however, was a busy day for once: I had to pack the two cats, now full-grown and weighing 13-14 pounds apiece, into the carrier and transport them to the vet's for their annual shots and worming, then to vacuum the whole apartment to pick up as many fleas as possible, then to spray every inch of it with a flea-killing spray, then to fetch the creatures back, then to bicycle a mile to fetch chow mein for dinner, and finally to spray the poor beings thoroughly, which they hate, since the vet's milder spraying had left live fleas on them. The next day--yesterday--I found 3 live fleas on the carpet, so the effort failed to stamp them out, and will have to be repeated shortly.) Generally I have plenty of time to waste on reading and playing records (I brought down here only about 250 out of about 1100 that I had in NYC; perhaps you will hardly believe that this seems to me a Spartan collection, with many first-rate things unrepresented); and that's about all I ever do in the evenings--aside from conducting the cats on their twice-daily excursion through the corridors and staircases of this building. (I have tried to induce them to step out on the roof, but they will have none of it; they simply don't realize that they are confined in a small building and that there is a vast world outside its doors; I suppose this is just as well.)

The card I'm sending is one of a group I found in a bookstore near Columbia back in '73 (or earlier), no doubt representing "psychedelic art", which I found attractive. There are at least 7 insects in it, not counting 5 or 6 ants on the rock; the mosquito-like fly shown inside seems to be present on the ferns at bottom, though in this reduced reproduction it can barely be recognized. Apparently no other life is present. I can't help thinking that painting of this kind is far more likely to be admired and valued by the future than the empty abstracts supposed at present to represent the "real" art of our time. (Of course, there is certainly something hardly realistic in supposing that there will actually be a future in which people will be able to concern themselves with such matters.) I should have mentioned that one of the things we often do in the evenings is to play Scrabble. At my mother's suggestion we have altered the rules to admit words in French, and really I don't see how we could get along without them. This also helps us to utilize the Z. I usually roll up a score between 300 and 350 (just once I hit 420), and hers is a bit lower as a rule, though she has won at times. Once or twice I have managed to sextuple a Q or Z (I remember that I scored 84 once, but have forgotten the word that did it), but this happens rarely. I am sure you would still have no trouble in thrashing me, and wish you had the opportunity to do so. I don't suppose you have any intention of visiting Florida? This would be the best season, of course (our daytime temperatures are mostly in the 70's, or even the low 80's on occasion.) We would be delighted to have you here (we have a decent sofa-bed) if you would do us the favor of coming.

over

I wish I could send you pictures of our co-residents, who are now rather large (and certainly quite portly) orange tabbies, Mittens with a more leonine face, Purry more feminine-looking; it is delightful to see them lying in each other's arms, washing each other. (I must get some kind of camera.) Purry no longer brings me a ball to be thrown, which he will then tear off to retrieve; he used to do this frequently, but seems to have grown tired of the sport. Neither of them shows anything like the athletic ability of Mimi, to whom I send my love.

It's been a good many weeks since I last bicycled to the outskirts of this town to see what flowers are blooming. I'm sure that, even at this midwinter time, something is, but of course all I see in Venice itself is weeds (e.g. Emilia like little carmine-red paintbrushes, and Zeuxine, a tiny-spiked orchid in the lawns, far from showy.) Last Sunday I ventured just a little way out, and was rewarded by finding Zamia, the native cycad resembling a clump of ferns, putting out sooty-brown pine-cone-like cylinders, evidently its flowers, and a curious fungus I've seen only once before, like a bright-vermillion cage 4" high. I am sure there is much to be seen which I am missing. There is a very large vacant lot not far from here, in which I found at least 40 species of flowers, all new to me, last year, but alas, in October it was all mowed off flat, and I don't know whether anything but grass has been able to bloom there since. (This was a serious loss, for I have no doubt that there would have been autumn flowers different from any I managed to find elsewhere, if the wretches had only let it alone.)

One reason I didn't get out during December was that my mother's sister Carol was in the hospital. It was to be near her that my mother moved to Venice in the first place. Five years younger than my mother, she was still very strong and vigorous, and we owe to her any number of things, from the cats' catnip (picked and dried by her in Michigan) to my mother's purple hand-knitted afghan, and the teakettle I use every day. She had moved into a little house in Venice because she felt it was too dangerous to remain living all alone in her house out on the beach a few miles from here, wholly dependent on her car. As it turned out, the danger was in the town instead. While walking her dog, she slipped on a bottle lying in the gutter, and fell, smashing her thighbone. The surgeon repaired it, but as a sequel of the operation, an embolism lodged in her lungs. After this she got worse and worse, and after about 20 days, went into kidney failure, and had to be put on "peritoneal dialysis" in the intensive-care section. On the day after Christmas (a day when none of us went to see her), her eldest son called us to tell us she had died. The embolism had gone to her brain and killed her instantly. The sad thing is that none of this had to happen. She was in perfect health--much more so than my mother. If it hadn't been for that damned bottle... I still can hardly realize that she has been taken from us, and you can imagine how my poor mother felt. She said pathetically to me the other day that now she is the only one in the world who remembers what her childhood home in Bloomington, Indiana was like--there is no one now who can correct her memory of it. I feel the same way about the house I lived in as a child in Yorktown Heights, N.Y.--then completely rural. I often dream about it. I am sure it now exists only in my memory--it must have been destroyed and replaced by a cluster of a dozen bungalows.

Well, as you can see, our Christmas was not a merry one, and our New Year will not be nearly as happy as it might have been--ought to have been.

Is your new Index completed by now?

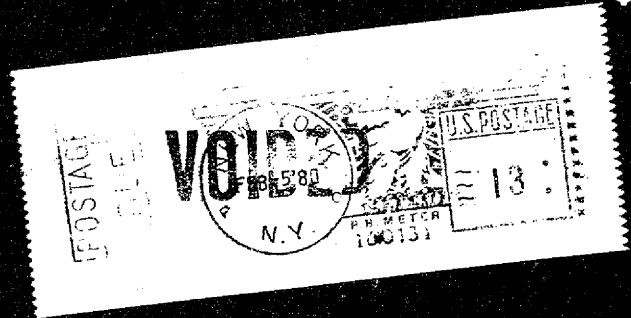
Yrs with love,

Lex

(& Mittens & Purry)



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