



Toinette

In the Niobe Fountain

Many years ago I was told about a distant cousin who had a tiny house, complete with a tiny pointed roof, inside the hallway of her very large home. There was a tiny bathroom, a tiny kitchen, and a bed barely long enough for her. She covered the walls with recipes, torn pages off novels and research papers, children's book covers, dissertations about the state of the State, articles on economics and medical issues, remedies for scratching cats and drooling dogs, titles of popular songs, letters from relatives and grandchildren. Eventually these were covered over by telephone book pages, pages of the Koran, recipes from her family, travel brochures, pages of library books long overdue; topped by a layer of prescriptions, laundry and dry-cleaning bills, birthday cards and food ads, crafts, building advertising, business cards, and coupons for sodas added to the collection.

There was no logic to her acquisitions, but she insisted on them, asserting that she felt cold and that the paper layers provided good insulation, which helped her fall asleep faster by keeping her warm. Since she lived in southern France, she had plenty of heat from the abundant sunshine, but even the midday sun on her tiles and her roof appeared insufficient.

With all this dispersed knowledge surrounding her, she could not fail to be knowledgeable in all subjects, though no one had ever seen her, in spite of years of spying, reading the material around her. Yet she discoursed at length on any subject, whether the neighbors neglected their

guinea pig, our Aunt Mathilda's asthma, or the relationship between insanity, heredity, and the drinking of green tea. She could expound on the latest treatment for alcohol or opiate addiction, the most glorious reception at the Elysée Palace or the White House, how to purge your garden of moles and mosquitoes, or create world peace.

Even when you brought this encyclopedic woman a propitious gift, she squarely told you what you'd done wrong and how offensive you had been, even unknowingly, in your dealings with your father-in-law, or your second cousin, the one who chose German citizenship after WWII; how your own children had permanently damaged her staircase wall by applying their buttered hands over the grass paper she'd applied that very day. She didn't take kindly to disagreement, refuting any argument, since she was an expert in so many areas. Asking for proof exposed you to further interminable, uninterrupted discourse.

She was a political expert who could spell out President Wilson's and Bush's faults and failures, and how they'd manipulated the government to their own ends. She coyly hinted at her innumerable degrees, including an M.D. and one in herpetology, and the highest artistic awards she received in her youth, not to mention medals for sports achievements.

Her husband, when tired of her endless prattle, locked himself up into his home office while their children crowded around the television. The words in the mini house were so rich, so compelling that they'd penetrated her subconscious, and even though she had no close friends, she discoursed on all subjects endlessly for the benefit of her five cleaning ladies, the gardener, or the gas repair man. When her rare visitors showered before bed, her words reached them through doors and plastic curtains, and when, exhausted, they managed to fall asleep, she still discoursed through their bedroom door before retiring to her little papered house.

What caused her to be so talkative? Was it her high-strung but adoring mother, who found her delightfully and admirably impulsive? Was it the fact that this woman never worked a day in her life, having not learned the skills needed for a job, how to study for a degree, or acquire the skills needed for a basic certificate? Was it envy of her older siblings? Tongue too long for her mouth? Doctors who failed to diagnose her logorrhea? Whatever the cause, the result is that no one ever succeeded in silencing her.

One day she was taken, much against her will and the weak protests of immediate relatives, with the help of a moving company and three police officers, to the Palais de Versailles garden and placed in the cool basin of a special breezy fountain, probably Niobe's, since no one could stanch her interminable word flow. Now water, too, falls noisily from her mouth, covering the flow of her irrepressible speeches, disguising them lest her utterings offend international visitors ambling along the alleys of *le Parc du Jardin de Versailles*.

Antoinette Constable has been published in *Louisville Review*, *Sierra Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Willow Review*, *California Quarterly*, *El Portal*, and anthologies. Two of her essays have won international awards. She studied with Linda Watanabe McFerrin, David St. John, and Ellery Akers. Raised in France during WWII, Antoinette has worked as a registered nurse in the UK and the United States. Now retired, she enjoys traveling, inventing recipes, collecting copper items, and learning Russian. She writes under the pen name Toinette.