

A Commonplace Garden

*In search of my mother's garden,
I found my own.
~Alice Walker*

*Gardening is akin to writing stories.
No experience could have taught me more
about grief or flowers, about achieving
survival by going, your fingers in the ground,
the limit of physical exhaustion.
~Eudora Welty*

*A visitor to a garden sees the successes, usually.
The gardener remembers mistakes and losses,
some for a long time, and imagines the garden
in a year, and in an unimaginable future.
~ W.S. Merwin*

*In a way, a garden is the most useless of creations, the most
slippery of creations: it is not like a painting or a piece of
sculpture—it won't accrue value as time goes on. Time is its
enemy; time passing is merely the countdown for the parting
between garden and gardener.
~ Jamaica Kincaid*

*Every flower holds the whole mystery in its short cycle,
and in the garden we are never far away from death,
the fertilizing, good, creative death.
~May Sarton*

A publication of the Coe College Alumni House Garden
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52402
<https://coealumnigardens.weebly.com/>

Planting Flag Iris

The air is thick and sultry, with no breeze to animate the cottonwood trees. My hair hangs limp, soaked in sweat. Above me swallows soar with an aimlessness I can't afford. My job is to hew order and discipline into the soil. I create neat rows of beans and cucumbers, eggplants and onions: a systematic cultivation seeking symmetry. Today, I'm building a wall of Iris to secure the edge of the garden against wild grasses.

The border between the garden and uncultured prairie is covered in volunteers: thistles, quack grass, lambs quarters. The hoe moves rhythmically in my hands, scraping the area clear of these weeds, plants growing in the wrong place. I've found that gardening is more about killing than planting.

The tubers vary in size, misshapen tumors twisted with knots and roots. My thumb unexpectedly penetrates the fleshy exterior to find orange sludge oozing onto my hand. The pink iris borer larvae leave the tubers rotten and dead inside the uncorrupted outer skin. In anger I hurl the useless tubers across the field of wild grass, as far as possible from the garden.

Each hole I dig feels different. In some places the soil is loose and damp, in others dry and packed down. I want their resting place to be perfect, but what does the tuber prefer? I know Iris are named for the Greek goddess of the rainbow because of their

The Garden Quarto

Wildness is more a quality than a place, and though humans can't manufacture it, they can nourish and husband it. . . .

The gardener cultivates wildness, but he does so carefully and respectfully, in full recognition of its mystery.

~ Michael Pollan,
Second Nature: A Gardener's Education



Fall 2019

endless variations in hue. But I don't know what color these Flag Iris will be. I didn't see them in June when they were blooming. I'll never see them beyond the seed.

The newly planted row of Iris follows a strict pattern of one-two, one-two. But standing up to gaze at my newest planting, I realize the whole line veers to the left in a graceful arc. Meanwhile there's a chirp of crickets. I wouldn't say it's singing, but I've learned to live with it.

The dirt inside my fingernails is the only souvenir I take with me.

~Rita Rochelle, Coe Student ('21)



Indestructible Daisies

The rest of the overflowing rows in her greenhouse were fragrant and hale – broad butter lettuce leaves, chlorophyll carrot tops, indestructible daisies – but the *Epidendrum porpax* was dead, and as Scarlet cupped her hands around the molded dirt that held the tiny plant's useless roots, she mourned yet another failure to nurture something beautiful, to protect something fragile.

~Kimberly Potts Savage, Coe Alum ('94)

The Vegetarian Gardener Contemplates Rabbits

I

Mr. McGregor vs. Peter Rabbit

Blossoms, small messengers from paradise,
nipped in bud. Rabbits munch my flowers, beans,
and brussel sprouts, snack on lettuce, apprise
their friends of broccoli and mustard greens.
They invite their cousins, uncles, aunts
in-laws, shirt-tail relations to make a feast
on my produce. They're rude, brazen. I can't
frighten them away. They freeze. Their least
quiver deters me. I know their gall,
but their noses wrinkle innocent. Teeth
like knives cut pea stems, neat, diagonal
when I'm not looking. They should come to grief!

This attitude marks change, from girl to elder.
Youth loves Peter Rabbit; age McGregor

II

Paradise Without Rabbits

The Burpee Seed Company offered a \$10,000 prize
for the heaviest pumpkin.

Youth loves Peter Rabbit; age, McGregor.
I would heat up the pot for rabbit stew,
renouncing meatless meals, thinking murder.
No, I'll think something else, dream over new
seed catalogues. Each page utopia
or heaven or both. If I planted, grew
a winning pumpkin, cornucopias
of prizes would be mine. I wonder, do
rabbits eschew pumpkins? In these bright pages
I win; I rest under my vine, the shell
of the pumpkin, my house. Rose cabbages,
bee-balm, four o'clocks, forget-me-nots spill
out of pictures into my dreams, arise
blossoms, small messengers from paradise.

~Ann Struthers
Visiting Professor of English, Retired



From *The Pillow Book*

I remember a clear morning in the ninth month
when it had been raining all night. Despite the
bright sun, dew was still dripping from the
chrysanthemums in the garden. On the bamboo
fences and criss-cross hedges I saw tatters of spider
webs; and where the threads were broken the
raindrops hung on them like strings of white pearls.
I was greatly moved and delighted.

As it became sunnier, the dew gradually vanished
from the clover and the other plants where it had lain
so heavily: the branches began to stir, then suddenly
sprang up of their own accord. Later I described to
people how beautiful it all was. What most impressed
me was that they were not at all impressed.

~Sei Shōnagon (c. AD 1000)
Ivan Morris, Translator

On Floriography

If you often find yourself at a loss for words
or don't know what to say to those you love,
just extract poetry out of poverty, this dystopia
of civilization rendered fragrant,
blossoming onto star-blue fields of loosestrife,
heady spools of spike lavender, of edible clover
beckoning to say without bruising
a jot of dog's tooth violet, a nib of larkspur notes,
or the day's perfumed reports of indigo
in the gloaming—
what to say to those
whom you love in this world?
Use floriography, or as the flower-sellers put it,
Say it with flowers.
—Indigo, larkspur, star-blue, my dear.

~Karen An-Hwei Lee
Lee's books of poetry
include *In Media Res* and *Phyla of Joy*



The Temple

Up the steps
the road falls away
with its grunting buses
and howling taxis,
the Hanging Gardens lies in front
glittering in swathes of foliage
sacred green
like a shakti goddess manifest

the scent of cut grass
heady as incense
fills the operatic sanctum
reverberating with stillness

worthy of worship
mythologies
in the shape of flowers
Krishna kamal, parijat
sit like perfumed deities
on regally reclining creepers
or the dancing hips of hedges

squirrel tails bounce playfully
like holy fire
parrot beaks in vermilion
nipping blazing sunflowers
for seed offerings

white champa glowing like purity
strewn on kumkum red earth
dressing the mandala of lawns

walkers in sneakers
make the daily pilgrimage
burning karmic fat
and praying for release
if temporary
from their urban clutch.

~Mrinalini Harchandrai, Coe Alum ('99)
from her book *A Bombay in My Beat*