

A Commonplace Garden

- Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals.

~Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

- When I go into the garden with a spade, and dig a bed, I feel such an exhilaration and health that I discover that I have been defrauding myself all this time in letting others do for me what I should have done with my own hands.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Anybody who wants to rule the world should try to rule a garden first.

~Anonymous

- I am writing in the garden: to write as one should of a garden one must not write outside it or merely somewhere near it, but in the garden.

~Frances Hodgson Burnett, *In the Garden*

- Life begins the day you start a garden.

~Chinese Proverb

- I appreciate the misunderstanding I have had with Nature over my perennial border: I think it is a flower garden; she thinks it is a meadow lacking grass, and tries to correct the error.

~Sara Stein, *My Weeds*

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

The Garden Quarto

Now you evolve and
swell like a perfect flower;
you speak the way
a tacit blossom speaks;
my body's shining
like the body of a stream;
I, a mute gardener,
feeling the onset of wings.



Fall 2017

Daffodils

If I ever have a garden, which someday I will, someday when I have the time and stability, I will grow daffodils. Bright yellow ones, like stars against their soil sky. I'll grow other things too, forget-me-nots and daisies and tulips, but the daffodils will always be the priority.

Years ago, a boy who loved me gave me a daffodil. A single daffodil, not even with the stem. He had plucked the bloom from his mother's garden, the most extravagant yard exhibition for miles around. Residents of the neighborhood would structure their morning runs and dog walks around the garden so they could stop and look and admire the garden in bloom. The petals were pigmented, the soil sound, not a leaf out of line. The boy's mother spent hours in her garden fussing and fertilizing, so I'm sure she noticed the stolen daffodil. I wonder if she ever said anything to the boy. I wonder if he was ever sorry.

Her garden had begun on an impulse. On the six-month anniversary of her husband's death, the boy's mother came home with an abundance of tools she didn't know how to use and an idea to become a gardener; someone who could care for things, someone who got up in the morning and did something useful, someone who could feel the earth around her and dig and get dirty and be alive. She bought spades and rakes and shears and too many bags of soil and seeds—more seeds than anyone could plant and cultivate and grow in a single lifetime, let alone a single season.

"The house is so colorless," she had said. "I want something beautiful."

The first year of the garden, when the flowers had bloomed, her wedding ring fell off as she was tending to the tulips. According to the boy, she ripped every flower to shreds looking for it, the petals becoming melancholy confetti. He picked up the pieces.

The boy told me he wanted me to have a daffodil from his mother's garden because he thought of me when he looked at them. The garden was his mother's beautiful thing after his father's death. Maybe I was his.

A few months after he gave me the daffodil, which I pressed and kept, he moved away for college. When we said goodbye, he promised that someday he would give me a bouquet of daffodils every week during the spring. Someday when we were together again. Someday when we could fall in love without knowing we'd have to say goodbye. I didn't believe his promises, but they were pretty to listen to, every word a flower blooming in the back of my mind.

But promises, like flowers, cannot live forever.

I was not surprised when he called me with news of his engagement. It did not break my heart. He can give her his daffodils. I will grow my own.

~Maggie Hart ('20)



Last Dance

Casa Blanca lilies give their white petals
to the smallest wind, oh any wind will do,
and if they could sing, they would sing some sweetly
erotic song. Stella d'oro, blooming all
summer would sing Puccini, full orchestra;
little yellow lilies with peachy stripes down
their trouser legs sing Sousa marching songs, and
tiger lilies aren't tigers, have leopard spots,
and sing torch songs, "Just me and my baby...."
Dave always called Trudy, "Babe," she who had been
a Lady Marine, gone now to the graveyard grass;
and Mary Claire who has known more sorrow than any
torch songs knows—"Just one more for the road," while
you held me close and we danced the last dance of a
night we wished would last forever. The climbing
red rose sings folk songs, the marigolds yodel
country music. Oh, sweet boy of that last dance,
I still think of you even now, although it
was miles away, years ago and you married
another. Morning glories sing hymns of praise.
I praise what was given and what was taken
away, even this garden's amazing blooms,
although summer passes and frost rimes the buds.

~Ann Struthers
Visiting Professor of English, Retired



From "As A Man"

Steve was our son, our only, and we hadn't seen or
heard from him in four years. We'd prepared
ourselves for the news, but you're never really ready
for a call like that. The phone rang at 4:24 in the afternoon
—I knew because I had just looked at the clock on the oven.
Somehow I knew this was it. As soon as the phone rang I
had a feeling, and I wanted to remember what time it was.
I wanted to remember as much about *before* as possible.

When the woman told me, I asked her to hold on. I
covered the receiver and yelled for Chet. He came into the
kitchen, and I didn't tell him yet. I just wanted him there
in the room with me.

The phone was a wall-mount and I stood up while the
woman told me. Chet stood next to me. He looked beyond
me, out the window, at the snow coming down in the
fading daylight.

Can I ask you some questions? I said. I'm sorry. This is
just a lot to take in.

I understand, the woman said. She was a doctor.

Did he look like he was healthy? We haven't been in
touch. Just...

His body weight is normal. He was wearing a warm
winter jacket, a red one, and had gloves on.

Nice gloves?

Good, sturdy gloves, she said. The sort you wear if you
work outdoors.

What else? I asked. I knew, somehow, that this woman,
the doctor, understood she was doing me a kindness. Do
you have children? I asked for some reason.

I do, she said quickly. He had on a nice pair of boots, a
pair of jeans, and a flannel and a sweater. She paused
then. His fingernails are trim and clean.

There may be people here in town who can speak more
about him, she went on. You were listed as the emergency
contact.

Who found him?

The Trellis

I felt myself growing on a trellis like a rose;
I felt a firm, dark expansion of petals.
Your neck and shoulders were soaking wet;
You, a voiceless gardener with slender wings.

I saw tiny droplets of moisture on your breasts.
And I caught a broken glimpse
Of floodwaters out of the corner of one eye.

The house was painted a naked color;
I changed shape in your changing arms.
For a little while, the trellis
Was pale, and dark, the way an evening is.

You were a trellis, curved as the racing water.
I hid my face in your tiny flood.
Then I didn't know if I was a trellis or a rose.

Now you evolve and swell like a perfect flower;
You speak the way a tacit blossom speaks;
My body's shining like the body of a stream;
I, a mute gardener, feeling the onset of wings.

~Nick Mason-Browne
Joanne M. Pochobradsky Assoc. Professor of Spanish

A neighbor, the doctor said. Your son had been
working in the garden. I'm told he was the building
manager and that residents loved the small garden he put
in. I'm sorry there wasn't anything we could do.

You've done plenty, I said. Keep him safe for us, will
you? We'll be there soon.

Each time the woman, the doctor, had said "your son," I
immediately saw Steve as I always did: Seven years
old, his bangs sticking out from underneath his snow cap.
I saw him chasing our old dog, Butch, in the front yard.
Steve with his arms stuck straight out like he was an
airplane.

It was comforting, somehow, knowing that he left the
world when it was snowing. That his last time on earth
coincided with my favorite memory of him. He was thirty-
seven years old when he died.

We spent that whole next day in bed looking at old
photos, talking, crying, holding each other. Chet
found an old cassette recording of Steve pretending to be a
sportscaster, dramatically narrating a neighborhood
baseball game, and we played it over and over again until
we could recite it ourselves. Chet kept getting out of bed
and pressing rewind, letting Steve's ten-year-old voice fill
our bedroom.

How about one more time? he'd say, and press play.

All those years of never knowing where Steve was, who
he was with, if he was happy, safe, we at least had the
comfort of knowing he was still in this world. I could look
out on a nice day and hope it was nice where he was. I'd
think of him when slicing an apple for lunch, how he
always loved apples, any kind of apple. He wasn't a picky
kid. We were lucky in that way, that he was the sort who
was up for anything.

As we lay in bed, the room, the world outside was the
same. But now everything was different.

~Laura Farmer ('02 Alum)
(first published in the *Crab Creek Review*)