

A Commonplace Garden

- The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions; but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed by earth-worms.

~Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould*

- The best fertilizer is the gardener's shadow.

~Author unknown

- I cultivate my garden, and my garden cultivates me.

~Robert Brault

- Gardening, reading about gardening, and writing about gardening are all one; no one can garden alone.

~Elizabeth Lawrence, *The Little Bulbs*

- Montaigne, the essayist, said he hoped Death would find him planting cabbages.

I myself would like to meet Death in the flower garden—falling face down onto a cushion of *Dianthus gratianopolitanus*, if it's not too much to ask.

~Elizabeth Sheldon, *Time and the Gardener*

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Spring Revelations

We had begun to think the winter would never end, but today, it was seventy. Right in the middle of April! It was spring. Not the first.

April had fallen into snows and disappointed us
time and time again.

Sitting on the still brown lawn,
my friend took off his shoes and shirt.

I was surprised he had a layer of fat
above his belt. I had thought he was an athlete.
I know he loves to swim and ski.

My roommate walked inside and shaved
his beard which had disguised him the long
and strict winter.

He reappeared with acne scars,
looking fresh-faced for the summer.

I sat on a case of Rolling Rock beer and talked to them,
roommate and friend, celebrating the coming of spring,
though the trees were not yet green,

Beside the porch steps crocuses—
purple and yellow—blossomed bravely, one with a bee
sniffing hopefully inside, and they reminded me
that winter never fully stays.

~John Logan ('43 Coe Alum)

Poem from Logan's *Collected Poems* (1989)

The Garden Quarto

The cold smell of potato mould,
the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

~from "Digging" by Seamus Heaney



Spring 2018

The Vegetarian's Garden

Along the garden fence by six-foot dill
(a sprig of it will guard against a witch)
the Chinese rhubarb there, medicinal,
has been grown for centuries because it
cures catarrh and quinsy. There's selinon,
Homer's dark green parsley, and chard, white-veined,
which Theognis loved—Aristotle fond
of red-leafed. Rabelais brought France romaine.

You brought me love and grief; you brought me seeds.
You left before the slender shoots unfurled.
You didn't stay, sweet thief, to hoe and weed,
you stole away and left me with a world
diminished, dark, bereft of cake and wine.
And now the blacksnake lives beneath the vine.

~Ann Struthers

Visiting Professor of English, Retired

*I heard the bird's shrill cry,
which comes to men as a messenger
of the season for ploughing;
and it struck my melancholy heart,
since others possess my flowering fields
and mules do not pull the curved plough for me.*
~Theognis

Silver Star

Beyond the civilized lawn,
Queen Anne's lace has grown up as
A check against the coyotes
That roam the oak woods, appear
After sunset, in shadow.

As I recline, hummingbirds
Appear from nowhere to check
On why I'm here & what I
Expect from my long journey --
Arriving after sunset.

A TV satellite dish
Entangled in golden rod
Listens for distant voices
From beyond the gathering clouds,
Purged of earthy confusion.

As I watch, a hummingbird
Approaches repose among
The dark leaves of a lilac,
Now long past bloom, swallowed in
Shadow, lost in clarity.



My wife ventures off, walking
Up the newly mowed path toward
The oak woods. A red-tailed hawk,
Sustained by up-drafts alone
Appears against the dark sky.

She has been warned the path to
The left leads toward blackberries,
Seductive & treacherous,
That stain our fingers & teeth
Those times we're freed from restraint,

I am enclosed on all sides
By oak wood. In spite of that
I sit in the shade, watching
The hummingbirds sip nectar,
Embraced by late summer flowers.

~R. D. Drexler
Whipple Professor of English, Emeritus



Range River Bog

Along the lake's western shore were hundreds of water lilies, yellow bullheads, their odd oval shape of six petals like snake heads sticking out of the water. They were accompanied by countless white lilies, surrounded by reddish-green leaves, floating on the surface. The petals were white as fresh morning snow, filled with a yellow center, like a midday sun. Unable to resist the temptation, I paddled over to them and pulled one close to my nose, intoxicated with the fragrance. As I entered the patch of flowers, I discovered the floating leaves were attached to plants rooted firmly under water, their resistance creating a notable drag on my Old Town canoe. I slowly paddled through the plants, like an ice breaker creating a path to the sea, only to have the leaves slide back into their chosen place, once my canoe had passed them by.

I landed the canoe ashore next to an anemic black spruce. From my vessel I saw cattails, cotton grass, a few tamaracks, and one pink bog orchid—a mythical flower clearly worthy of its well-deserved reverence. Crawling over my boat seat and various supplies, I reached the bow, lifted my right leg over the gunwale, and took my first step. My foot immediately sank six inches into the green and red sphagnum moss, an amazingly flexible surface I was now trying to stand on. With each step, the moss immediately yielded, covering my feet with water. I was walking on my first bog.

Around the bog, I saw carnivorous pitcher plants, leatherleaf, sweet gale, bog beans, and in a small pool of black water the tiny yellow blooms of floating bladder-worts. Although I felt I had entered an alien world, I knew I was not the first person on this bog. There had been people coming here for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. I imagined being one of the first European travelers to explore this country, attempting to comprehend this endless sweep of trees and lakes on the Minnesota/Canada border. I thought of these travelers in their canoes, stopping here for a

rest, perhaps experiencing the same feelings I was experiencing.

In Ireland there is a tradition of interring the deceased in the murky waters of a bog. Europeans had long ago discovered the calm, oxygen-depleted waters of a bog are an unparalleled environment for preservation. The decaying sphagnum moss slows the process of decomposition to a standstill. As I thought of the explorers who may have preceded me here, I wondered about the possibility of someone buried here, under my feet. The idea was remote, but possible, maybe even likely.

When my grandfather died, he was buried on a cold December day with a light dusting of snow and a chilling wind, making even standing upright a chore. Grandpa liked crisp weather and enjoyed being outside. He would often take me hunting on what he called "grandpa's farm"—hunting for rabbit, squirrel, pheasant, deer. The buck with a huge rack was on my mind but never grandpa's. He only wanted the meat. We often walked along fence rows and the middle of fields, blanketed knee deep with snow and broken corn stalks. He would have loved his final resting place, interred on top of a hill, overlooking a valley of corn fields. He would have loved the cedar and maple trees growing in the little cemetery, and the lone walnut tree, reminding him of the countless hours he spent picking up walnuts.

As my right foot prepared to swing over the gunwale into the canoe, my weight transferred to my left foot, sinking further into the sphagnum. Crawling back to the stern, I took my seat and started paddling north up the Range River. My mind, however, remained behind with the tamarack, the pitcher plants, the black spruce, the pink bog orchid. No cedar, maple, or walnut trees, no walnuts to harvest, but perhaps the bog serves as a cemetery for someone else's grandfather.

~Jeff Chittick ('12 Coe Alum)