

How Does Your Garden Grieve?

There was once a man who suffered from depression. He applied drugs and therapy to his sorrow. They helped only superficially, like a band-aid on a compound fracture. He also tried gardening as a distraction, but seemed to have a brown thumb. Everything he planted withered in early heat or froze in early frosts, or was devoured by bugs or blight, or got dug up by stray dogs. He stood looking at the failed garden, on a gray and cloudy day when his despair was particularly strong, and thought redundantly “I am growing sad.”

Then the garden was transformed before his eyes. He saw that indeed, that was what he had done: he had Grown Sad. That is his story. It has no conflict – he doesn’t do conflict. In any battle, he might lose, and loss would make the garden grow even thicker. The battles thus go unfought; which also feeds the garden’s growth. His story has no resolution either. With a zeitgeist that does not believe compassion can happen, it never will resolve. He cannot resolve it himself.

Here he shows us some of his flora. “The stoic-cactus, *pathos invertia*, grows in cruel harsh environments where no plant should be forced to exist; and survives only by developing a hard and thorny shell. Within it is swollen to near-bursting with a watery sap that tastes exactly like tears; but not a drop can get through the unyielding thick skin. And here, hovering above, is a *parentis distans*, or boys-don’t-cry. The two exist in a strange and unpleasant relationship; a kind of hostile symbiosis. When young, the cactus blooms and its sap flows. To the *parentis*, though, these blooms and sap are poisonous. At their appearance, its leaves swiftly turn away, sifting down a disapproving black pollen which withers the blooms, and turns the sap to an acid which forces the cactus to harden its skin. The cactus comes from a land where its name, in the native language, means either ‘resentment’ or ‘cancer’. Sometimes, where a bloom has been withered and the sap-turned-acid eaten through, a tumorlike fruit forms within the plant. Its colors are painful to look upon, and its taste is pure bitterness.”

“The bullybush, or *persecutus cowardans*, is found in schoolyards everywhere. It attacks smaller, vulnerable plants. Its sharp-pointed branches will target a victim and seek to puncture it, letting out the sap. It is especially attracted to blossoms, which it will

stab to the heart and destroy. The bush's touch, like that of the boys-don't-cry, turns sap to acid, which scars the victim but is the bullybush's chief nourishment. An entire ring of them will spring up round a victim – such as the stoic-cactus whose sap is like tears – and attack it without mercy.”

“Here is a Lucy's-football or *gymnasia tormentis*. It too is found on school playgrounds, where children who hate sports and are lousy at them are forced to play them anyway during P.E. class. Because they're lousy they screw up – miss the catch or whatever – and the rest of the team yells at them viciously. This only makes them hate sports more. Everyone knows this except P.E. teachers, who refuse to believe it.”

His garden contains familiar species as well: a weeping willow, stinging nettle, bindweed, crabgrass, poison oak and ivy. It always has the last rose of summer and the first withered leaves of autumn. Try the 'loves-me, loves-me-not' round on any flower therein, and it will always come out 'not'. And yes, he does sometimes water it with his tears.

The garden is in constant flower. It blooms on anniversaries: of Martin Luther King's assassination, Matthew Shepard's murder, Kurt Cobain's suicide; of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Challenger explosion and the Lusitania going down; of Oklahoma City and Hiroshima and the day Auschwitz began operations. It blooms for relationships broken off, and beloved friends dying too young, and cruelties from parents or teachers or employers or peers, that wound as deeply as a knife in the gut.

No one knows quite what to make of the sad garden, not even its owner. Somedays, when the weather is grey and cloudy and only bad news fills the paper, the garden grows so thick it obscures him from view. One wonders if there's not something that could be done for him, recalling Sleeping Beauty in her castle surrounded by briars. “Prince Charming doesn't exist,” the man growls. “Or if he ever did, he's long since become extinct.”

He moves on to another plant. “These garish flowers with the irksome aroma are cheer-you-ups, *jovialis incomprehensii*. Well-meaning friends constantly thrust bouquets of them on me, along with self-help books and pats on the back and invitations to try their favorite preacher or support group or meditation regime. They tell me, Stop self-pitying, stop isolating, stop doing this, stop doing that....Opinion on *jovialis* is much divided.

Supporters say it's beautiful and should be planted everywhere. Detractors call it a noxious weed, which returns absolutely no nutrition to the soil."

He does not speak of his sad garden to many, not trusting the response. Reactions, indeed, have varied. Some people don't take it seriously: they are the ones who come with bright advice and bouquets of cheer-you-up. They enrage him. He has learned to spot such people at a distance, and avoid them. Others might see his garden as a tragedy, and himself as a poor emotional cripple, to be cosseted and sheltered by pity. He steers clear of these types too. Their pity, meant to clear away the garden, only fertilizes it instead. Some even dare to suggest that some part of his soul might want the garden to persist. He hates that idea with a passion, all the more because some small logical part of his mind insists it might be true. One friend, witty and wry like Dorothy Parker, once brought him a new plant: prickly and unattractive, drooping like a dog expecting punishment, but with tough roots, and grasping tendrils to snare any other plant that came near. She said it was a poor-pitiful-me, or *egomania reversii*. When she had gone, he looked at it for a while. Then he stomped on it, ripped it out by the roots, and threw it on the compost heap. He has cold-shouldered that friend ever since. (The plant keeps growing back, where he least expects or wants it.) Still other people flee in horror. This is the reaction he most expects, and in a way prefers. When they run away he doesn't have to deal with them, and their mockery or condemnation or pity.

"Does anybody offer compassion?" we venture to ask. He turns away, clouds covering the sun. His life has left him with a deep disbelief in the very existence of compassion. If compassion truly existed, his garden would never have flourished so. The two cannot coexist. Confront them with each other and there would be an apocalyptic explosion, like confronting anti-matter with matter. He is certain it would tear his very soul to atoms.

(Sometimes, in deep dreams he does not recall at waking, he sees his lower extremities become roots, twining deep to hold him immovably in the garden's bitter soil. If he was dug up, would he wither and die?)

Yet, somewhere in a dusty back corner of his heart, he contemplates rescue. He cannot conceive how such rescue might be effected, or of anyone who could possibly bring it off. He can only fantasize some vague form of miraculous intervention, some

fairy-tale or science-fiction plot device impossibly become real. He too thinks of Sleeping Beauty in her briar-ringed castle, sought out by her rescuer even after a hundred years. He talks of the Victorian explorers who, on hearing from Africa the vaguest native myths of wondrous animals – the camelopard, say, or the Babylonian sirrush – would set out on expeditions seeking them. The giraffe, gorilla, and pygmy hippo were all thus discovered....Then he turns again, and says that with his luck he'd probably get George of the Jungle instead, swinging to the rescue only to bash headlong into a manchineel tree.

“Manchineel?” he explains. “That’s the legendary Poison Tree, also known as the Upas. Everything about it is toxic: sap, fruit, flowers, even the scent. Nothing can live within miles of it, for any living creature that approaches it drops dead. In Meyerbeer’s opera *L’Africaine* the heroine does herself in by sleeping under a manchineel. (She’s on a bluff above the sea, watching the guy she loves sail away forever.) This garden’d certainly be an appropriate place for one. I could plant it in memory of all the people who told me I was ‘too needy’. Of course it’d kill the rest of the garden, and half the neighborhood as well....”

(Sometimes, in those deep dreams wherein he takes root in the garden, he becomes a manchineel tree.)

“Here’s a withering-sarcasm vine, *denigratis masochii*, related to the stoic-cactus and with a similar tearlike sap. Its razor-sharp thorns fend off attack, but often as not injure the vine itself, because as it grows it usually twists and turns inward onto itself....And here is a well-known species: *deprecata solitarii*, or wallflowers. Each has a single blossom, small and pale, furred inwards and away from the light. I should wear them the next time I go out – the bars, parties, even church socials or whatever; or run personal ads. Nobody ever responds; it’s as if I’m totally invisible....I wonder sometimes how wallflowers get the way they are. Do they evolve that way themselves, or are all the other plants doing natural selection against them?”

“The histeria vine – yes, it is similar to wisteria. Some varieties bloom in violent colors: yellow and orange and blood-red. This kind, *passionata subrosa*, is more my style. The blossoms are tightly clenched, like fists, and are purplish-blue, almost black;

the same color as bruises. The vines are rarely seen, as they twine under and behind everything else, but their grip is strangling, and as unbreakable as steel.”

“Here’s the first thing that ever bloomed here: a bait-and-switch, *amore illusoris*. I got it from a guy I dated for several months. We just did ordinary date things – go to restaurants, watch TV together; just spent simple time together. But, he gave me the kind of affection I’ve craved my whole life. He sought me out; he was always touching me and being affectionate. So naturally, I fell for it. One night I told him I cared for him. He went postal. He told me furiously we were only friends; he didn’t love me, never had, and made it sound as if nobody in their right mind ever would. I haven’t seen him since...*Amore illusoris* attracts bugs, the same way Venus flytraps do. They land on it, expecting nectar, but instead it violently spits them out. Not that they fare any better than with the carnivorous plants: the force of the rejection can strip them of wings or carapace, leaving them crippled or dead.”

One night, at the absolute bottom of a slough of despair and rage, he rooted the garden up. With machete, hoe and shovel he attacked it, and with his bare hands, not caring for thorns and spikes. He tore it out, and then collapsed; exhausted, dirty, bloodied; heartbroken and soundlessly weeping. Within a few days, the garden had all grown back. It always did. So there he sits in stasis, there in his garden of darkness and shadow, plucking the petals that always come out ‘loves-me-not’.