


Icons of Loss and Grace







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of Loss
and
Grace*

Moments from the
Natural World

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Innocence





Instructed by a Seed
Or, How the Garden Tells Us
What It Knows

FIRST THERE IS only the cool, bare soil, and then a slender filament of green. Bursting through the surface, it stretches sunward, gradually unfolding as a wispy whorl of leaves.

Another *Cosmos bipinnatus* has been born.

“I often wonder what it feels like to the seed,” my gardening friend says, musing on the process. “Rather like giving birth, I suspect.”

Closing my eyes, I imagine the event in slow motion—and with sound. It begins with the explosion of the seed wall, with the crashing of an embryonic leaf into the dark and fertile soil. Quickened by the sun, the epicotyl presses up toward light and air. Drawn by what it neither sees nor understands, it rises blindly to the surface of the earth.

Heaving, creaking, the substance of the world is rent asunder by a seed. And in the end, a single blade of green is left as testimony to the process we call Life.

What does it feel like to the seed? Like birth, perhaps, or more like death? Like something that it’s never done before, yet knows? Like what the seed was made to be?

These were hardly the sorts of questions I considered as a novice gardener. Only six when I began to turn and till the soil, I was more concerned with the tenacity of Johnson grass roots and the gumminess of heavy Gulf Coast clay.

Kneeling in my little garden at the east end of our small frame

house, I had no knowledge of such things as friability or tilth, microbial activity or humus. I had no words for the way the soil would cake up on the soles of my once-white Keds or work itself below the cuticles of my nails. I had no understanding of the sort of chemistry that caused the soil to come together in a clod, to gather weight and density, to coalesce like stone.

If I added water to a certain type of clay, I learned, the result was a primitive sort of burnt orange paint. It was this that I used to coat the flimsy wooden fence around my garden, this that turned the heels of my hands a funny shade of brown.

What I knew about gardening at that age, in short, was purely experiential. Barely able to read and write, too literal minded for abstract thought, I reveled in the sensuality of childhood. The world was a potpourri of textures and smells, of colors and tastes and sounds. It was the scent of fresh-cut grass and dirt and oyster shell crackling beneath the tires of my old blue bike. It was everything that pressed against my skin, everything immediate, everything, as Hopkins wrote, “original, spare, strange.”

Perhaps it was a function of being nearsighted, but I found myself particularly entranced by little things. Being myopic, I discovered, was a gift. Get down close enough, I learned, and the world became a universe; each twig, each leaf, each inch of soil became a cosmos.

What intrigued me more than anything, though, was the germination of the seeds I planted every spring. As a rule, they were simply pinto beans taken from my mother’s stockpile on the kitchen shelf, but that was part of the mystery. How could something so hard, so unyielding, so plain metamorphose into something supple, beautiful, alive?

I couldn’t understand, but child that I was, I could enjoy.

These days, I confess, I am far less literal than that. These days when I garden, I am far more prone to speculate about the earth as metaphor, to find not only pleasure in the seasons but meaning, too.

“All our gardens are expressions of what we were, tempered by

what we are, what we have and what we want,” Jennifer Bennett writes in *Our Gardens Ourselves*. Or, as Henry Beston put it, “A garden is a mirror of the mind.”

What, I must ask, does my garden say of me? The winding paths, the piles of stone, the toad that sleeps beneath the weathered railroad tie—what sort of mind do they reflect? These are the questions I consider as I set aside my grubbing hoe and rake, as I press the soil around the supple roots of lemon grass, as I live my one and only life.

For more than twenty years now, my husband and I have made our home on a wooded acre six miles south of town. Rangeland turned to residential lots, our subdivision skirts an ancient fault line separating Texas Blackland Prairie to the east and Edwards Plateau limestone to the west. The shelf of rock that runs beneath our front yard’s meager crust of soil has left no question as to where our own land lies.

Raised as I was in a country far more lush than this, in a geography of rice fields and pecan bottoms and oak trees draped with Spanish moss, I had no firsthand knowledge of what this rocky land would bear. It didn’t take long to learn.

In my first few months here, I would watch as, one by one, the plants I’d loved since childhood turned chlorotic, wilted, and died. Starved by the chalky, alkaline soil, the azaleas and gardenias never thrived the way they had back in the gardens of my youth. Doomed before I even put them in the ground, the hydrangeas withered, turning brittle in the searing August sun.

This land was harder than I knew.

Or was it?

“We left this Mexican buckeye here for you,” I recalled the realtor saying as he led us on a walking tour of our lot. I had had no inkling what a buckeye was back then, but the knowledge that the builder had seen fit to leave it where it was pleased me nonetheless. Something beautiful, I reasoned, was at home in this terrain; something beautiful, I concluded, could survive.

But it was only when the last gardenia died, when the Chinese



Where It All Begins

THE CATS' WATER BOWL is full of birds. First a cardinal, blazing red even in the dim light of the morning, then a troop of sparrows. One after another they hop in, disappear in a blur of water, then spring up to the nearest branch to sun themselves and tweak every feather into place.

This is where it begins. In a bowl of water. On a morning full of birds. With the sun barely over the treetops, barely over the galvanized roof of the shed. With leaves fallen and blown into a single row.

This is where it always begins. With a leaf floating in a bowl of water. Presided over by birds. With the sun on a galvanized roof. Feathers, red, and every one in place.

It is the daily rearrangement of the world. Like poetry, the pieces gather into lines—curved lines, curved the way that cat ears arch toward sound, the way that shadows wrap themselves around the leaves of trees.

All the parts, even the frayed ones, are used.

It is morning when I walk to the back of the garden, morning when I spot the clump of baby blue eyes sprawled across the rich black earth. Unexpected there between the Clary sage and the garlic chives, the rosemary and the southernwood, it is blooming with the hyacinth and the winter honeysuckle, blooming with the first of spring still weeks away.

This place is the place where I live.

This year, I imagine, I will grow sestinas in the patch of soil below the neighbor's chain-link fence. I will watch them push up through the earth, watch them as they climb, sweet and supple, wrapping hold-fasts on the wire mesh between the pointed posts. By June, if the sun and rain are right, they'll be twining in the top of the long-dead sumac, straining toward the light.

Closer in, just beyond the birdbath, couplets will emerge full grown. Buried like bulbs since fall, they'll have spent the winter growing underground, forming themselves into words. Come spring, they'll rise up tall as sentences, as lines—straight this time—straight as the stems of daffodils, and just as green.

Already, sonnets are sprouting from the compost. Last year's orange peels, potato skins, and grapefruit rinds; seeds from a watermelon served on a summer night; peach pits and bad tomatoes, bought and forgotten at the back of the refrigerator; a crust of bread; chickweed pulled from a backyard flowerbed; old spaghetti; coffee grounds from Sunday a week ago, when it was colder and the house felt damp and chill; four eggshells, crushed; a piece of twine; leftover salad, gone limp and brown; leaves raked from the front yard one Saturday at noon; broccoli stems; the remnants of a squash—reduced to fundamentals, reduced by sun and rain and creatures visiting at night, these leavings of the world are all the things I love.

Turned and lifted, turned and left to settle on themselves, they are slowly changing into verse. Pressed, pungent as shards of garlic, they too are words, ripe for picking from the earth.

This is where it begins, this urge to know the world, to put its see-smell-taste-touch-hear into something we can say. Like “Good morning,” or “It looks like rain today,” or, if we forget the rules of logic for a moment, “The sun sounds like the songs of birds.”

Driven out of our kitchens, or away from our computers, driven from the television or the sofa or the bed, we rip off our shoes and run our unshod feet, soft as cats' paws, through the grass. Creatures



Dayflowers

PARTIAL TO MOISTURE AND SHADE, false dayflower rises from the winter beds luxuriant and lush. Then, for the first month or so of its life, it does nothing dramatic at all—nothing, that is, save for swathing the yard in green.

In short, I'm always glad to see it sprout, always ready for the change its presence signals in the earth. But welcome as it is in early spring, before the redbuds bloom and the cedar elms leaf out, *Comelinantia anomala* looks bedraggled in this second week of May.

Clearly, it is past its prime.

"Did you plant that?" my husband's cousin asked while visiting here two weeks ago. I had to laugh.

"It's a weed," I told him, trying to remember that his home in Colorado had gotten snow just days before. Anything in bloom this time of year, I suspected, would look beautiful to him.

"It grows pretty much like grass," I continued. "Takes over if you let it." And indeed, take over is what it had done.

Roughly two feet tall, false dayflower was growing from one corner of the yard to the other—under the soapberries and the pear, under the peach tree and the plum, in and out of the mountain laurels, among the vinca and the iris and the oak. While my guest stood back and watched, I began pulling it out in clumps.

Two weeks later, I'm at the job still.

Unlike true dayflower, or widow's tears, false dayflower is an

annual, its flower distinctly more lavender than blue. An even more telling clue to its identity, however, is the arrangement of its two larger petals and three upper stamens, which look for all the world like a nose and two fuzzy yellow eyes.

Yanking it out by the handfuls, I glance away from the tiny face. This isn't personal, after all.

Welcome in one season, rejected in the next—the false dayflower that had brightened my early spring has suddenly become a bane. But isn't that the way weeds are? Plants unappreciated, uninvited, wrong for this or that specific space?

This plant, it occurs to me, is really no more a weed than any of the natives growing in the flowerbed out front. Gaillardia and pink evening primrose, Texas thistle and greenthread, winecup and horsemint, Gulf Coast penstemon and mealy blue sage, Texas star and skullcap, Engelmann's daisy and gaura, ox-eye daisy and zexmenia, the last of the bluebonnets and the yarrow—might they be weeds as well?

Visiting native plant nurseries these days, I seldom fail to go away amused—and more than a little smug. “We have a yard full of this,” I mutter to my husband as we pass a row of spiderwort or greenthread. Why, even the straggler daisies, which I pull by the fistfuls from underneath my roses, are suddenly for sale.

So when is a weed a weed?

“I could help you with this,” my brother-in-law offered on a visit several years ago. Standing on our backyard deck, surveying what struck him as a jungle, he frowned at the chest-high stands of sunflower goldeneye, the clumps of agarita, persimmon, and sage. “A good lawnmower is all you'd need.”

His tone was light, but his message was sincere. Where I had seen native, natural, low-maintenance, he had seen something very different. He had seen a patch of weeds.

Curious about what was native to this place, I decided years ago to