

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

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Garden in Re-view

Excerpt from "A Thousand Beautiful Things (A Life in Two Hallways and Four Small Rooms) - a novel in search of a home

Morning glories filled my dream, twining, stretching, reaching, unfurling one after another, at first from a distance and then in close-up bursts. Their movement was like a time-lapse film covering the backyard of the apartment I lived in then, spiraling around the wrought iron staircase which went up to my neighbors, and then shooting over the back screen door. Finally they were on the other side of the door itself, moving up walls, up the legs of the dining table out there, and then taking over the ceiling. I woke with a sense of calm and bliss and although it seemed the flowers moved silently in retrospect I think they carried the movement of classical music, an interlude more than an overture. I am not sure what transition state they alluded to, what metaphor their velvety deep violet petals and heavenly blue kin were trying to give me the message of. I remember the strength of the stamens though, a buttery yellow rising to ebullient white.

I believe I had this dream the spring I finally left my ex and if the flowers indeed offered a chorus of subdued trumpets, the tones were singing of comfort and hope; that perhaps leaving as my repeated earlier attempts always feared, would not be completely arduous. Odd how, years later, that dream remains vivid to me.

Morning glory represents "love in vain" according to the Victorian "Language of Flowers" which attributes various sentiments to flowers so that people could express their feelings through whatever flowers were given as gifts. I had no idea of that sentiment, which actually was a pretty accurate symbol for my relationship at that time, but I do know I've gifted Morning Glories not because I've wished vain love on anyone, but because they are pretty, colorful and fairly easy to grow. Also, at least in this climate, they are perennial, and I like the idea that one may give of oneself, pass that energy along to another, and so on ad infinitum. My family had what was called a woodshed on the farm where I grew up that was later covered with large wide circled sheets of aluminum, perhaps from a barn roof. The aluminum was filled with very small perfect holes where nails had been and through these morning glories went from the outer siding to the inner wall. The various indigo hues and shadows of the flowers against the luminous equally blue aluminum invited a spellbinding stillness. I loved listening to the buzzing of the fuzzy bees amid the vines, and loved also listening to rain as it struck the tin. The resonance was as silvery.

As if distilling a memory and passing it on, I've attempted growing morning glories in many places I have lived. Once, in my last efficiency studio, I even grew them up against the windows indoors, but string by string, from window boxes to terra cotta pots, they've grown their best here on the fire escape of my current third floor walk-up. The fire escape was actually one of the attractions of this place since I saw it as another room, imagining at some point trying to construct some kind of silk tarp above it, a sort of kite-like roof.

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Of course getting out onto the fire escape has never been the easiest thing. Even the final part of its ladder to the ground broke off before I moved here so climbing up from the outside is a bit of a Herculean jump. The square pine-green paint peeling windows to it from the kitchen open in, and then on the other side two square wobbly screens open out. There is a small iron radiator covered with a foot-wide board just below these windows and since the board is not attached to get outside it's always been better to just either slide over the sill and inch along backwards, or duck and climb out as if going through a chute towards the sky.

The sky is what one should look at if, minding one's head, one wants to get the better experience. (Looking down is more a case of a dilapidated folding lawn chair on the neighbor's landing, the cracked sidewalk, the spotty lawn through telephone lines. Yes, this is an interesting view, but not quite euphoric.) Actually not many people who've visited me have had either experience simply because it doesn't really seem worth the effort to climb out a window just to stand on a fire escape. I mean *I* might think of the kitchen windows as a Parisian portal and the black iron fire escape floor, complete with matching rails, as an Eiffel view, especially at night, when streetlamp lit and listening to the occasional plane hum overhead or, towards dawn, the clanking foggy railroad echoing sounds from the far off port, but most right-headed people just see climbing out onto the fire escape as a semi-dangerous pain in the ass. To each his own though, frankly, in the event of a fire, the escape is not the smartest place in which to go.

I believe many of my neighbors lean toward the preceding viewpoint as well or just saw it as annoying urban insanity for me to grow a garden out there. Even when I was sweeping it off, bits of rust and bark detritus flying, the woman who lived downstairs yelled up to me, "I don't meant to be *cheesy* but you're sending crap onto the top of my porch roof!" Mulling over the word, *cheesy*, (Did she mean like toe fungus?) I reassured her that I was working from the top on down and would most certainly get around to sweeping off her roof too.

Once clean-up was done I did calisthenics working from both ends of the fire escape, lobbing and lugging up various kinds of pots, gardening tools, bags of soil and seeds. The piece de resistance was an old wooden white garden gate found in someone's trash from up the street. Standing eight feet tall with geometric forms where vertical and horizontal slats met, visions of climbing vines immediately filled my head. While working on constructing the garden's lay out however I quickly learned that there was a certain wind factor taking place since the garden gate fell over repeatedly while pots blew off like multi-colored balloons. Picture framing wire was the handiest remedy I had for that, securing not only the garden gate to the rails but anything else (gnome decorations maybe?) likely to move. Though it was rough on bare feet, one of the nice things about working on a floor with open grating is the availability of places to twist wire. I just had to remember to bend ends down for otherwise they made sharp copper points.

Putting dirt in the boxes and pots of course meant another round of sweeping to avoid being arraigned on further *cheesiness* charges, but I've never minded cleaning or the actual planting part of gardening. It must

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be genetically primeval; the satisfaction of digging with fingers, of getting hands dirty, yet in some ways planting also reminds me of baking. There is the leveling off of the soil around the edges of containers as if evening out crust. There is the sifting as if with flour, the rolling as though of dough. There is the very blackness of the earth like rich chocolate; and then there is of course the anticipatory waiting for seeds to rise.

I am always a bit excited and impatient once seeds are packed down and the soil is watered. I have been seeing in my head those pictures on the seed packages and I am hoping for something mystical, magical, not quite an impregnation but something out of "Jack and the Beanstalk", a majestic Technicolor cinematic experience of growth on the rise. A religious element is involved in the process too, be it pagan or druid, there is a homage to the earth by getting on one's knees as if worshipping soil, praying by giving thanks that it might give back.

It is fortunate that many toss out old windows and poster frames around my neighborhood too. I've used them as miniature greenhouses and terrariums by setting the glass both on top or propping it on the sides of pots. Again the baking metaphor comes in, the heat of the sun creating a tropical oven as moistures mists the clear and green heads start to pop. Shortly after this, nature takes its course, inch by inch, for the daisies, the bachelor buttons, the marigolds and Susans with eyes of black.

Every year, aside from morning glories, what gets planted changes a bit with what returns, as does the accoutrements or lack thereof. At one point I had a large green vinyl chair out there, one of those round 1960s relics which appeared extraterrestrial on its four antennae-like legs. Its screws were loose however, making for dubious swiveling that shook the whole fire escape so it wound up back on the curb as I decided my own screws weren't as loose after all. Another time a bunch of deer antlers made an interesting centerpiece, especially as Georgia 'O Keefe blossoms became pom poms around them, but they got in the way for the sun baths of my cats. Inlaying marble swirled, peach-hued ceramic bathroom tile upon the grating made for a restive effect, especially with the Dutch blue saucers and plates I found to go under the pots, yet when it rained these surfaces were too much like a Water Slide World for comfort.

Various neighbors have watched me toying in the garden over the years but other than the portly elderly man who lives next door and has a beat-up camper in his drive (Do I make any fuss about what he may be doing in there with body parts?), negative comments have been few. In fact, once the woman of *cheesy* vocabulary moved on a nice couple moved in who didn't mind the water running out from the bottom of the pots and onto their porch roof. They said the sound reminded them of waterfalls, even if it also made them re-check the Weather Channel now and then since they'd been lead to expect sun.

This year, since I've put silk flowers out there instead and double-taped the kitchen windows shut, entering the 20th Century and sealing in the coolness of the air conditioner I broke down and got, I thought I would feel the lack of the fire escape as a sort of amputation, but gradually I realized I used it as a place of escape, never access, and it still serves this purpose. The wooden board upon the radiator just below the windows has a long outdoor chaise lounge cushion on it, patterned like a rain forest.

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Winters I would sit on this cushion and admire the gardens change anyway, often photographing the pots in snow or the watering can after an ice storm; how everything glistened, sometimes blindingly. Yes, I have photos of the garden from every season and some of these studies have found their way into my art as if by osmosis. It is true that the paintings may not live up to the photos or the photos to the actual flowers but memory makes a kaleidoscope from all of these artifacts.

The two square kitchen windows above the Amazonian lawn furniture cushion make a collage, an installation.

Look at its diagonal cross beams going left and right, creating diamond shapes of glass. See the artificial white-flowered vines tacked on the other side of these beams and then the silken fronds beyond. See the oriental calendar hung in the middle, a landscape tapestry on the bamboo from the Chinese take-out. Look at the sky ever-changing past all of that given the weather of the day, either gauzy gray or the blue of infinite steppes. At night reflections of headlights pass over and the ruby blinking of an occasional air liner.

Yes, come sit down and look out this garden window. What phase is the moon in, what pattern in the wheeling stars? What is out there? What's coming up next?