WRITERS NIGHT:
CULTIVATE YOUR GARDEN
Writers Night
New Series Vol. 1, No. 2
“Cultivate Your Garden”

Work originally presented at the Northfield Public Library on Thursday, April 27, 2017

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Sponsored by the Northfield Public Library, the Southeast Minnesota Arts Council (SEMAC), and the Northfield Poet Laureate
Hanging Gardens for Me
Julie Ryan

I stand at the Gate of God
still missing the memorable green hills
and rolling valleys
of my homeland.

This scene, once a flat fertile plain,
contains remnants of pointless battles
and the rubble
of my dreams.

With love, you looked up and built
a miraculously abundant hanging garden,
an evergreen meadow
on arable land above.

You moved before me the earth,
the shrubs, the vines, the succulent fruit,
tender new shoots that feed
upon the dew.

Now wind-swept, an intentional paradise
of organically-wrapped columns, arches, and aqueducts,
a cultivated mountain
is skillfully kept.

You've keenly raised the river for me
and my garden of delights, I only wish that I might rise
to the level of being
your grateful queen.
Bustin’ Out All Over
Marie Gery

Small canning jar lined on two shelves
this watercolor gift propels me into
hot steamy Iowa August days
hotter, steamier in Mother’s kitchen

First sterilize quart jars, then
tomatoes – scald, peel, blanch
fill the Ball jar almost full
make sure no air stays inside

Now, peaches, spiced peaches
same as tomatoes except
cinnamon and cloves scent the air
lids put on with great care

Cooled, jars of ruby & amber
filled cellar shelves, disappeared
one by one over long snowy
cold Iowa winters

Corn was another story
Mrs. Jungers canned corn
told Mother with great detail
cut kernals off cob, tsp salt
add boiling water fill almost
to top, put on lids with care

Two rows of summer gold
occupied their own shelf
until the explosions
corn kernals everywhere
unlike tomatoes & peaches
corn expands not Ball jar

Soon Mother discovered
tomatoes, peaches, corn
in cans on the grocer's shelf
store-bought, opened, jarred
placed on basement shelves
and Dad never noticed any
difference
Because you're waiting in the truck, I dig quickly.

November's soil is sharp with ice
but loose enough to let go of the daffodil bulbs
your mother brought from the Netherlands
and the black tulips I special ordered
the year I thought a gothic garden might suit
the house, though every spring
you brought home flats of yellow
marigolds indecipherable from dandelions,
so with time the darkness I scripted gave way
to brightness and weeds, and these bulbs
forced deep, have multiplied,
and now—thief, surgeon, midwife—I unroot
one by one, like memory, tight clusters
probably better left buried
but at the new house, next spring,
they'll bloom like guilt and
you'll say I like those yellow ones,
and I'll say yes, this place isn't so bad.
A Garden Triptych
Adriana Estill

I.

The Garden of Eden is inherently exclusionary, you know. God is an anxious landlord, concerned about his land value; For heaven’s sake, it was only an apple. Once you’ve been kicked out of Eden, what kinds of gardens do you grow?

I heard through the grapevine that Adam and Eve started a community garden, areas measured out, each plot with its own tiny shed. It’s amazing how many people you can feed when you work together.

II.

But listen. The story that broke my heart this week is of the black mother whose son was killed by a cop car, plowed into him it did, pinned him under where his blood drained into an early spring garden redolent of onions. Look. Some gardens are watered with blood.

III.

My son joked today that Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings are too focused, too simple, too black-and-white. I laughed, The Garden of Earthly Delights in my mind, The panels’ shift from morning to night drawing too many temptations, too many delights and colors, all turning sinister: the joys of nudity and people-sized berries turning to volcanic horizons and humans impaled by what once brought dancing.

In my backyard, the green onions shoot through the earth hardened by a long winter.
What do we do when what nurtures us kills? When my spring is your death?

I refuse to let my tears water the earth.

Instead I will measure plots.
Necessities
Larry Gavin

These maple shade the back yard all summer
and erupt in orange and gold through
fall. Their dark roots draw me down
to earth each morning as I walk
touching them on bare ground
to conjure the coming day. In spring,
we tap them when the time is right
and gather as a family to watch
the first amber drops drip to the bottom
of the tin bucket, sounding to us like life.
We boil sap to reduce it by
three-quarters becoming syrup in spring air,
and in the bottom of the pan. Stirring
constantly in turn: mother, father, son.
We disagree about when it’s done
aproning just right to breakfast
pancakes, to pour in cold glass to store
for all our guests, “the knowing” we call
them. Those that recognize necessities
found in the heart of every day.
Hai
Margit Johnson

はい

Hai (transl. yes)

The question is, who cultivates whom?
The garden? The gardener?
The Carleton Japanese Garden, where I volunteer during the growing season, cultivates me.

Early in April the garden dictates that I pick up my rake and rake.
All those red oak leaves that fell late winter, rake!
The detritus that blew in over the now-melted snow, rake!
Hai.

Come June, the tips of the mugo and Scotch pine grow longer, like fingers wagging at me, reminding me to candle!
Now!
Candle!

By late July the yews, carefully rounded green cumulonimbus clouds all winter, resemble adolescent mop-tops overdue for a serious haircut.
Prune! Prune!
Hai.

All summer the tiny, some might say delicate, shotweed shoots up through the blue rug juniper, hauling back its tiny 5-inch stem and catapulting fifty minute seeds,
creating more shotweed. The garden demands, 
Weed! Weed!

Only in late fall, my pruners stilled, the rake stored for winter, 
may I sit in the serene shelter, and bask 
in the last warmth of the autumn sun 
slanting across the wooden bench. Only then 
does the garden imply in silence that it has 
finished with me for the season. 
Hai.
Untitled
Tegan Chadwick (age 6)

When I walked in my garden I saw some pretty clouds
The vegetables were growing too
I watered the fruit, the vegetables and the flowers...
But the chickens came out and pecked the flowers all gone
Then I took the chickens in
And I let the flowers grow again
Next time I'll keep the chickens in the coop
The crab apple tree was Bobby's. A day after her grandson's birth, Mrs. Carver had the tree planted in a bright spot in the backyard. For Bobby, she said, but it was Ruth's face she imagined. She could see the tree through the kitchen window as she leaned over the sink, washing the coffee cup and breakfast bowl. From several vantage points in the house, she could glance out a window and there it would be, shimmering in the July heat, drowsing in dry-yellow autumn dreams, shivering bare-limbed in winter, sighing in late spring over a rain of falling petals. Here, she and Tom had raised Molly and Ruth, Bobby's mother.

The crab apple tree bore no fruit, made no mess on the lawn, but each spring, always in spring, early while the breezes held a hint of melting snow, cotton candy blossoms burst like a magician's bouquet, overwhelming the green leaves and dark brown branches.

Spring was when Bobby was born. Mrs. Carver had watched the men from the garden store, supervised the excavation of the hole, the clipping and airing of the roots, the settling of the small tree in its spot, a tree that had been one of dozens of trees side by side at the garden store. Uprooted and relocated, it would stand alone in the sunshine of the Carvers’ property.

Well, it would adjust, like all of them had. Its wounds would heal. Mrs. Carver had gotten dizzy looking into that perfectly cylindrical hole, backed away, listened for the telephone call.

The call had come, followed by other calls, followed by other wounds.

The next day, Mrs. Carver had stood at the gravesite, shadowy figures hovering nearby. Off to one side a mound of earth, discreetly camouflaged under a green tarp, blended in with the lawn.

They lowered the casket. A deep, polished oak, as beautiful a finish as their dining room table. Mrs. Carver's thoughts remained above ground. The crab apple tree would have to be watered. It would need a lot of attention in those first days.

Molly—always responsible—checked in on Mrs. Carver every week, picking up the slack now that Ruth was gone. Mrs. Carver could time her daughter's calls down to the minute, always the same time on
Sunday, always a half hour long. Enough time to get beyond the empty phrases but not so much that they ran out of things to say.

So you like the job out there?
Yeah, it’s great. But the hours are long.

Mrs. Carver picked up on the cue and said she had a pot of chili on the stove. They made loud kissing noises and said goodbye. Mrs. Carver ate peanut butter crackers over the sink, stared out onto the lawn, listened to the crab apple chat with the wind.

Every Saturday Bobby comes. Mrs. Carver doesn’t mind the mess her five-year old grandson leaves when his father comes to pick him up. Cookie crumbs on the couch, a hand print on the wall, the temporary loss of the remote control that she finds the next day while vacuuming under the coffee table. Bobby chatters like a magpie and acts like one, too, rummaging through Mrs. Carver’s jewelry box, digging out Tom’s old work boots from the back of the closet in her bedroom, beating the metal base of her stockpot with a wooden spoon.

Time for face painting. Only then can Mrs. Carver get the boy to sit still. Make me a witch, is what Molly used to say while Ruth always chose a clown. But Bobby asks for hobbits, blue aliens, or X-men. Instead, Mrs. Carver suggests they make up their own superhero, their own alien, their own mutant warrior. Bobby scatters the colors across the table, chooses red, and gives her detailed instructions.

Spring creeps up on Mrs. Carver. Blades of grass stand like startled soldiers. She fills the gallon bucket from the garden hose, swirls in a quarter cup of the chemical granules recommended at Menards. A treatment early each spring to protect the crab apple tree against a blight that speckles the leaves in late June.

Its lower limbs, already in bud, tap and brush her back in gratitude as she bends and pours a perfect circle around its base.

The crab apple tree is Ruth’s. Mrs. Carver only tends it.
Garden of Benign Neglect
Becky Boling

We bought a garden
that came with a house.
We bought it in summer
when rose bushes bloomed.

Robins and sparrows gathered
at feeders, waded through
rainbow pools in terra cotta basins.

An elm hovered above house and yard,
gathered us like errant chicks under its bower,
ferried squirrels from canopy to canopy,
sifted sunshine and raindrops over us all.

But we had no talent at green things,
no patience with suet and sunflower seeds.

We pulled out sprouting clumps of
green assuming they were weeds.
We sprinkled the yard with haphazard
love and hapless attention.

Like unreliable parents,
we gave too little too late.

We still have the house,
but garden bouquets are rare,
rousted by hardier, more common,
grass-like growths.

We euthanized our diseased elm.
Its withered roots still furrow the ground.
Blackbirds and robins fly by on route
to more hospitable dwellings.

Each season, green blades erupt
where once an azalea or peony reigned.
We don’t know their names.
Fortunate, they have no need of us.
That Rabbit
D.E. Green

That rabbit wasn’t dead,
sprawled out though he was
by the blasted peonies.
When I gasped from the second-
story window, he raised
his head, onyx eye tilted
up toward mine. When nothing happened,
he hopped to the garden to breakfast
on the newly planted bed.