Introduction

Ten years ago, I asked a dozen gardeners to email me their reasons for gardening. Their answers included these: peace, accomplishment, creativity, food, being outdoors, exercise, discipline, beauty, surprise, digging in the dirt, and worship. I nodded as each response arrived. *Yes, true. . . true. . . but there's more."* My experience of gardening was each thing they listed. But it was more—an elusive something, difficult to put into words.

Ten years ago, I attended a faith and writing conference. The keynote speaker described the art of writing as "an assault on the ineffable."

Over the past decade, I wrote these essays and poems as my foray into mystery, to give voice to the portal quality of gardening. Sometimes that window opens to laughter, sometimes to sacred light.

You hold in your hands forty attempts to reach what is just beyond my grasp. But, to paraphrase Robert Browning, a writer's reach should exceed her grasp, else what's a heaven for?

Why forty pieces? I guess because it's a Biblical number. Before Noah's flood, it rained forty days and nights. The Israelites wandered in the desert forty years, and Jesus was tempted there for forty days. There are forty days between his resurrection and ascension. So I borrowed a number from my Father's Word for my exploration of his world.

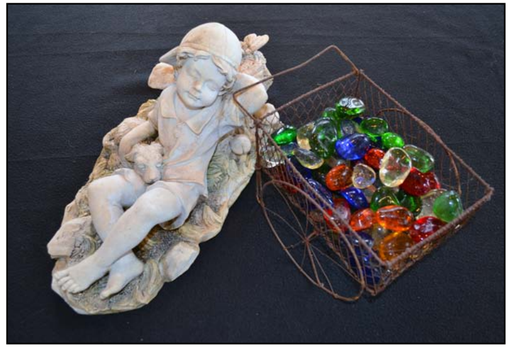
Although they were written over multiple years, I have arranged this collection as if they were a single gardening year, beginning in January and ending in December. Now I am eager to release this collection into your hands and return to my garden.

When you finish reading—or even before that—you may want to do the same.

Carol Van Klompenburg

April 2018

Winter Gardening



I search
a thrift store
for garden art.

A wire wheelbarrow
beckons from the clutter,
at first, ignored. . . .

Across town in my basement
a ceramic country lad
rests his head on a stump,

Hand on his puppy,
heedless of duty—
his task forgotten.

What task? I've wondered.
Today, I know—
wheeling a wire barrow!

Back home, barrow bought,
I study a catalog,
and choose for spring:

tree peony,
ice plant,
tiger-eye sumac.

Never, today,
do I step
into a garden.

But, my hunger great
amid snow and cold,
the garden enters me .

Nothing Gold

Below my kitchen window, the backyard lies bleak with March mud and grungy grass. I sigh. Grey skies loom heavy above greyer snow. The border gardens are an relentless boring brown.

But in the far corner above the slush, the forsythia sings, its twigs bursting with yellow stars.

The poem rises. I murmur,
"Nature's first green is gold.
Her hardest hue to hold. . ."

Yet again, Robert Frost has appeared unbidden.

Many springs he has been awakened by golden willow branches bending alongside country roads, and his words have burst from my lips, resounding in the van.

". . .Her early leaf's a flower
But only so an hour. . ."

The first few springs, my husband glanced over from behind the steering wheel, puzzled. Eventually his response diminished to amused tolerance. It was not so for our three sons: in the back seat they inevitably rolled their eyes and exchanged knowing glances.

Mom is doing THAT POETRY THING again. That is SO WEIRD.

Then they shrugged. Nothing to do but grin and bear it.

Over the decades, the back seat gradually emptied, occupied now upon occasion by my children's children, the van echoing with their music DVDs.

". . .Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief. . ."

The snow will thaw. The starbursts will give way to leaves. The grass will green. Summer doldrums will follow.

". . .So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay."

I know, Robert, I know. And yet, and yet . . . your words rise fresh in me each spring.

Gold might not stay, but it does return. Is that not a form of staying? I'm not sure.

Nevertheless, this spring I am grateful that the fleeting gold has been the forsythia in my own backyard.

Canna Surprise

Each March, returning from a week in Arizona, I start gardening. My Iowa location requires I start indoors, with plants I rescued from outdoors the previous fall. Each March for a decade, I have begun by potting cannas.

Conditions for their winter sleep have varied. Some years I dug the huge, dirty clumps and stored them on chicken-wire shelving in the workroom beneath our garage. Other years I broke apart the rhizomes, sprayed them clean, and stored them naked on trays in the wine cellar. One year I stored them in peat moss.

I gradually learned that their survival rate was higher in large clumps. Survival rate was also higher on wire mesh shelving than on trays. Each year, with the exception of a few ambitious rhizomes, the potted cannas napped for two months before peeking out. Some dwarf varieties stayed asleep until mid-June. With this slow-growing habit, most of them were not ready in time for my annual plant sale the second weekend in May. They languished in the sun porch, leaning toward the windows, until the greenhouse was warm enough. In June, I planted them outdoors and moved a few still-sleeping bulbs to the deck.

This year, in January, I split the canna clumps into individual rhizomes and potted them. I did not let the newly-split rhizomes heal for a few days as recommended. I never do. For me, the wounded edges of my bulbs heal as well beneath the airy potting soil as they do above it.

Mission accomplished, I surveyed the forty pots on folding tables in our windowless basement furnace room with satisfaction. *They'll sprout in March,* I thought, *and I'll have nice twelve-inch plants for my May sale. This year I did it right!*

Wrong.

All three varieties sprouted in two weeks. They shot up in the darkness of that basement room, gazed sleepily around, and wondered who put out the sun. The greenhouse still too frigid for their tender shoots, I transferred them to the sun porch floor. Except for the dwarf variety, they were a foot tall by February.

Each week, I water them in awe, thinking, *At this rate, I may need to transfer them to larger pots before the May plant sale. As I water, I puzzle over their bizarre awakening. Did I harvest them later in the year so they started their dormancy especially vibrant? Did they have more live and active cells in January than they normally do in March? Was the storage room cooler? Warmer? Did I water them more this year? Use warmer water? Did I plant them more shallowly?*

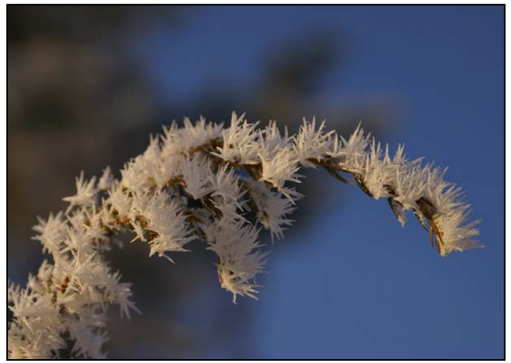
Often in life, I hunger for answers and predictable outcomes. But gardening is my chance to play, explore, and wonder. I relish surprise.

Watering completed, I survey the flourishing greenery. *Perhaps, this fall, I will Google the storage and planting of cannas.*

And then again, perhaps I won't.

I wonder what would happen if next year I wait one month longer—and pot them, instead, in February?

Sudden Freeze



This year, spring came early.
Crocus, daffodils,
then tulips bloomed—
in March.

Amazed,
I potted tender bulbs—
Tropicanna and
Star of Good Hope.

In my tiny greenhouse
as in the tropics
they sent shoots,
sprang leaves.

Last night frost fell.

Arctic temps invaded,
piercing even the
Plexigass protection

Today leaves dangle, limp.
I trim them to bare stalks.
Will new leaves come?
I do not know.

As a gardener, I never know.
I plant, I prune,
I watch, I wait—
in a cloud of unknowing.

Frost melting, dripping,
as I snip and wonder—
Today that cloud is laden
with mysterious peace.

Looking for the Light

I dig through the main floor freezer, in search of seeds. I find partially used commercial packets, along with Ziploc bags of seeds I gathered last fall. I check the kitchen drawer and find a packet of partially used seeds for a butterfly garden. I trudge down the steps to the basement deep freeze and find packets from Pella library's seed-exchange program.

My fingers chilled, I shiver and spread the packages on the basement pool table, separating perennials from annuals and reading which can be started indoors. I gather soil-filled seed trays, place one on the card table, drench it in water, and begin my selection.

I start with annuals. I don a pair of latex gloves, put some marigold seeds in the palm of my left hand, spread them around with a latexed finger tip, pick up one or two, and drop them into one cube of a seed tray. I repeat this process until twenty-four cubes are full, fold the seed envelope over, and set it on an unoccupied section of the pool table. I pick up a bucket of potting soil, dust it lightly on the twenty-four cubes, press the new soil down, and mist it with lukewarm water.

I search the seed packets for the next annual: zinnias. The zinnia seeds are bigger and need deeper planting. I pick them one at a time from my left hand, poke them 1/4 inch under the soil with my forefinger. When I have an entire tray of these planted, I drop potting soil in the tiny hole and mist them. This tray of marigolds and zinnias now full, I top it with a clear plastic cover.

I do the same until I have a half dozen trays of seeds spread out across the tables. The next day I do the same. I have used some of these trays for several years. Some leak, and I have lined these with a black plastic trash bag before putting the seed cubes into the tray. After several days, I have filled four folding tables in the basement room.

It's April, but a frigid one. Outside, the perennial beds, still unraked, endure frosty nights and hunger for warmer temperatures. So do I. Warmth will arrive, soon, I am sure. Meanwhile, after these seeds have sprouted they can bask in the sun in my tiny greenhouse.

Five days later the marigolds have sprouted, but night temperatures in the greenhouse are still far too low. Marlo consents to let me squeeze the marigolds under a grow light with his vegetable trays.

The next day, three more flower trays have partially sprouted, and it is snowing outdoors. I put these in the basement bedroom near the window and move in a pole lamp with grow-light bulbs. These shelves are soon full, and more seeds are still sprouting in the windowless basement room.

I tell Marlo I am going to move another set of shelves into the sun porch for the burgeoning seeds.

"I just saw damage on the sun porch ceiling from the high humidity," he says. "There are too many plants in there already."

He is right. It is overrun with rooting succulent cuttings that I took indoors last fall and cannas planted in January, which emerged two months ahead of schedule.

"Would the kitchen window be a better idea?" I ask.

"Fewer plants would be a better idea," he retorts.

"I know," I say, "I will remember that for next year, but I can't kill these!"

I suspect he is thinking, "Oh, yes you can," but he has the wisdom to remain silent.

I remove pottery from a set of sun porch shelves and carry them to the kitchen window. Outside the sky is grey; it is snowing again. Then Marlo needs my marigold tray removed to make space for more vegetables. A week later later, the kitchen shelves are full. In each window of my house, spindly plants now inch upward in the grey light filtering weakly through the panes.

Each day this April, the temperatures have been twenty degrees below average. In the outdoor greenhouse a tiny heater cranks out heat whenever the thermostat signals the temperature has dropped below forty-five degrees. And in the house both my plants and I turn toward the windows, looking for the light, and longing for spring.

Front Room Heritage

In January, when the cannas came up in two weeks instead of two months, I put them on the floor of my sun porch—the room in my house with the most natural light. When the Elephant Ears followed suit, I lugged those up the steps to the sun porch as well.

In March, I brought in a set of wire shelves and filled them with cut back geraniums. Then I moved in trays of succulents.

The sun porch, designed by an architect friend as an addition to the front of our home, is by far our most beautiful room. The ten houseplants which normally live there flourish in the light pouring in from three sides.

However, with the 179 recently added plants it looks—quite frankly—overrun. Even with a box fan blowing in fresh air from the adjacent living room, it smells like dirt.

Watering the plant multitude, I wonder if I should roll back the bright, woven-reed rug that creates a grouping of the wicker furniture surrounding it. Then I hear across the decades my mother's voice, recounting the family legend of her mother-in-law's "front room"—the best room in that family farmhouse. Rarely used, the room was appointed with pristine furniture whose fabric was protected by hand-crocheted doilies. That room was used only for guests—and only on Sunday evenings.

Then, according to my mother's often-told tale, each spring the furniture was removed, the rug was rolled to one side, and the room became a chicken coop—a home for baby chicks. The front room of my paternal grandparents' home then had its own earthy smells. Each time Mother told this talke, she grinned widely when she said, "The best room in the house—hardly ever used. And every spring Ma and Pa rolled back the rug and raised chicks in it!" She shook her head and chuckled again at this absurdity. I chuckled along.

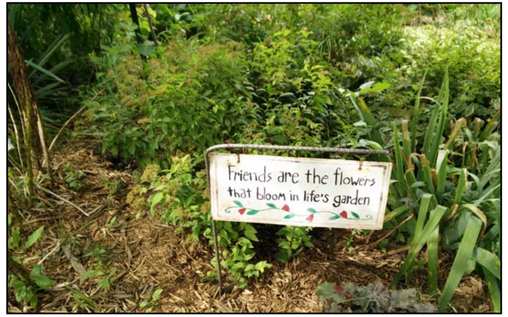
As I look at the cannas and geraniums, and consider rolling back my own rug, I remember other details of my grandmother's story. Her unmarried daughter who lived at home eventually became the family cook; Grandma cared for the chickens. On summer days when I visited there, she walked to the chicken coop each day to feed the hens and gather eggs. Sometimes she let me help. I can still see the huge boxes of eggs, trucked to Chicago from my grandparents' northwest Iowa farm. Even when Grandma's knees and hands were gnarled with arthritis, she made the twice daily walks to the multiple coops until she and Grandpa retired to town, leaving their forty-year-old daughter and her new husband to run the farm.

At birth, I received her first name as my middle one: Jane. She died when I was just twenty-five.

This morning, for the first time, as I survey my sunroom floor, I have no superior grin when I think of my grandmother's indoor chicks. I see them through her eyes. Her chickens were her passion as my plants are mine. And both of us made space, even in the best room of the house, for our passions. The sacrifice is so small and the pleasure so great.

In a moment of sudden longing, I wish I could tell her that today, after all these decades, I finally understand.

Beginnings



At a craft fair a decade ago, I stumbled upon a Dutch lace wall hanging: "Life began in a garden." It was the first time I met that maxim. I smiled. I bought it. I hung it as a garden flag above the flower bed near my driveway.

Whenever I drove into the garage, I smiled again. Yes, indeed: Life began in a garden—the garden of Eden, planted, according to Genesis, in the east by the Lord God. He made all kinds of trees spring up amid its four rivers. He put Adam there to work it and care for it.

Each succeeding May, I smiled as I planted Dahlberg daisies and geraniums beneath that flag in my tiny heritage from Eden.

The Dutch lace, however, was too delicate for the heat and humidity of an Iowa summer. After three seasons, the flag and its maxim were in tatters.

Other maxims replaced it, these on corrugated aluminum, some wise, some witty. One advised visitors, "Lose yourself in my garden and find piece." Another proclaimed, "Friends are the flowers that bloom in life's garden." One spoke of gardening hope: "To plant seeds is to believe."

One said, "Gardening is cheaper than therapy." Each time I walked through my garden and saw this one, I smiled and nodded.

I replaced the disintegrated flag near my driveway with a quip for visitors who needed to find me: "Out back, weedin'."

On my computer harddrive a collection of 135 gardening quotations waits patiently for the day I will find a creative use for them.

The maxim from that lace garden flag, however, remains among my favorites. Although it disintegrated long ago, its memory lingers. "Life began in a garden," I think again this April morning as I rake last season's leaves, uncovering the first sprouts of Autumn Joy Sedum. Perhaps someday I shall find new garden art with that proverb.

I turn to the Stella D'oro daylilies, pulling off last year's dead leaves, revealing new life there as well.

I turn my face toward the morning sun, and the lethargy of winter lifts. Hope sprouts again.

Yes, life began in a garden. That is true. And even more true: Each spring, in my garden and in my heart, life also begins.

Eden reborn. Again and again.

Burning Bush

The April before my gardens were to be part of a public tour, I decided to burn some of the previous summer's plant waste. Burning, after all, would be more efficient than raking.

I waited for a windless day. Then before lighting the Miscanthus grasses in the garden near the front entry, I readied a water bucket and hose. If the grasses blazed out of control and sent sparks toward the roof, I was ready to instantly douse the flames.

I lit a few brown blades near the bottom of the five-foot clumps, and the fire crackled slowly upward, the warming my face and hands. It inched around the clump from stem to stem, and then from the outer stems to the dried birch leaves alongside. When the flame reached the rocks, it fizzled into flecks of ash.

The front beds finished, I walked to the backyard corner garden, with more stands of Miscanthus. These stands were distant from the house; I decided I did not need the hose and bucket.

In these clumps, too, the fire burned hot and pungent. Here too, it ignited the surrounding leaves, an abundant gift from the backyard oaks. The flames then flickered along a trail of leaves toward a six-foot arborvitae (tree of life). That evergreen's moist needles could, I was sure, resist the tiny flames.

A few orange tongues licked eagerly against the green. Then, with a whoosh, the flames surged six feet upwards to the very top of the tree. There was no leisurely climb this time. With that whoosh—and then a roar—the entire tree was instantly ablaze. I stood paralyzed. My cheeks and eyes burned; my nostrils stung.

In seconds, the flames devoured the tree, leaving charred branches sending aloft a few final wisps of smoke. My paralysis gave way to fear—then to awe—then to a numb assessment of the damage.

On the tree's right side, obliteration. On the left, the upwind side, roasted needles clung trembling, some with a tiny trace of green. One moment it had been a tree of life, the next, a skeleton.

I burned no more beds. Instead, in the ensuing month, I raked leaves, cut down remaining mounds of grass, and planted geraniums. I watched the arborvitae and hoped, but it showed no sign of life. I concluded there would be no resurrection.

The garden tour loomed ahead, and I didn't want a charred

arborvitae shouting my shortcomings to the world. Tourists would gaze at its black bones, weigh my garden in the balance, and find it wanting.

They would be right. I had been negligent: I should have had the hose at hand, just in case. I had been ignorant: I did not realize the arborvitae's lush veneer concealed brown needles, ripe for conflagration. Each year its needles had died and dried, beneath new growth covered them—a collection of perfect kindling. Its green outer shell formed a living chimney, and the fire had fed itself in an upward rush of air.

I decided to finish what the fire had begun. I had the saw poised to hack it down, and then I paused. I saw again the roar, the heat, and the billows of smoke. I remembered that moment of shock as I had watched ascending billows, heard the roar, my cheeks burning, my mouth agape, I had been awestruck. In an eye blink, my arborvitae had been transformed by a power totally unexpected—and totally beyond my control.

I hadn't heard a God's voice like Moses at the burning bush. But, I had felt sheer power. Perhaps, like Moses, I should have taken off my shoes. I had stood for one brief shining moment on holy ground.

I decided to put the saw away, unused. The arborvitae would remain as an altar of remembrance.

A few days later, I planted a fast-growing honeysuckle vine in front of that charred tree of life. In the weeks that followed, the honeysuckle climbed the blackened branches reaching tender tendrils toward the summer sky.

Vacuuming Rocks

Today, for two hours I vacuumed a rock bed.

In 2001, when we were planning this entry garden for our newly added sun porch, I told the landscaper I wanted a low-maintenance area. I had plenty of high-maintenance flower beds already. He said he would choose a mix of low-maintenance trees,shrubs, and perennials. And he recommended covering the ground with landscape cloth and rock. “All you will have to do is a little annual cleanup, prevent weeds with Preen, and you’ll be all set.”

He didn’t tell me about the vacuuming. His choices may have been low maintenance, but they did drop leaves and seeds and twigs. And these cannot be raked or power-blown from rocks. They can only be removed one six-inch-wide swath at a time, using a leaf blower in suction mode. When the debris is trapped between or under rocks, more than one six-inch-wide pass is required.

So this crisp April afternoon, as each spring for a decade, I vacuum the entry garden. Marlo helps me convert our leaf blower to suction mode and coax the engine to life. I turn off my hearing aids, cover my nose and mouth with a dust mask, suspend the machine’s cloth bag from my shoulder, and begin.

I poke that blower’s hungry mouth into the shrubs to suck up trapped leaves. I suck up red berries from beneath the hawthorn tree. I drag it over every inch of rock in overlapping six-inch-swaths. Shoulder aching from the weight of the leaves, I empty the bag onto a tarp, take a break to prune a tree hydrangea, and then continue.

When I quit for the day, I toss the mask into the trash, wash a layer of dust from my face and hands, and collapse on the couch for a few minutes before starting dinner.

I have just vacuumed one-third of the bed—for its first pass. In a couple more afternoons, I will have completed this first pass on the rest of the bed. Later this spring, I will make a second pass over the entire bed. Even after this second pass, five percent of the leaves will successfully resist removal. But, in a few months, after a little more decay and a lot of new growth, this detritus will not be noticed. If I remember to faithfully sprinkle Preen, the entry garden will then be what the landscaper promised: a low-maintenance bed.

Flat on the couch this April afternoon, I wonder, *Why do I continue to regularly pay someone to vacuum the inside of my home—and insist on vacuuming the great outdoors myself?*

Today, I have no answer.

Next month, sipping coffee at the entry garden patio table and

surrounded by almost pristine rocks and blooming rhododendron, I still will have no answer.But, sipping and gazing, I will no longer be asking the question.

Book Festival

On Thursday and Friday,
with thousands
of other logophiles,
I celebrated words.

By Saturday
I was dizzy with them.
I told Facebook friends:
“This Festival of Faith and Writing
is almost too much fun.”

On the trip back,
I eased my withdrawal
listening to a luminous novel:
Marilynn Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,
downloaded to my phone
by my tech-savvy Michigan sister.

She also crammed my tiny trunk with
gifts from her garden:
angel-wing hosta,
star-gazer lily,
and an anonymous groundcover.

This first morning home
I pull on faded jeans,
cracked boots,
and gardening gloves.

I strap on my phone,
resume listening to the novel,
and load the perennials
Into the wheelbarrow.

The final chapter
lights my heart
as I dig homes
for three new plants.

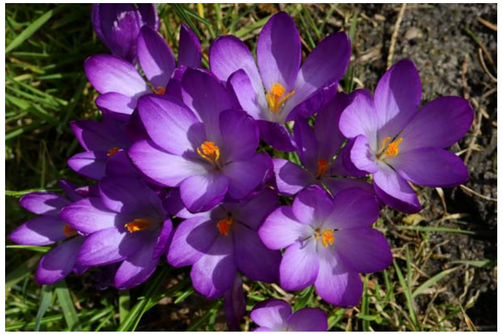
The baby quackgrass calls,
then the infant creeping Jenny,
finally gray-headed dandelions.

I groom the gardens,
under an April sun with a novel.
Both burn brighter
than three days of neon rooms
amid madding crowds.

This is pure pleasure,
but not too much fun.

The conference and crowds were margaritas,
but the garden and the book,
the listening and the looking,
are the water of life.

Easter Weekend



On Good Friday as I raked leaves from the garden beds, the crocus surprised me with their blossoms. They surprise me every spring, popping out amid last summer's garden debris.

When I wearied of raking, I fetched my camera and knelt next to the lavender blooms. As I took shots while standing and then knelt and zoomed in for close-ups, I was awed by their bright and fragile beauty. I was surprised by joy.

Back in my office I transfered the images from my camera card to computer screen and stared at the screen, hungry for a repeat of the same startled joy.

One photo was too distant—the debris dominated. A second was out of focus. A third lacked depth The lavender was faded, the surrounding brown drab. I was disappointed. *Perhaps if I should increase the color saturation in Photoshop.* That task completed, I stared again. The colors are bright now, but I still feel flat.

I recalled previous first-crocus photographs last spring, and a similar disappointment. *Why does the photo leave me flat?*

Then, on Easter morning, our pastor reads the resurrection story from John 20. "While it was still dark, Mary came to the tomb. . ." He says that some Easter mornings, we come in darkness, too. A spouse has died. A biopsy has revealed cancer. A daughter has rejected our faith tradition. . . .

But, he says, because of Easter, even in the darkness, we can still have hope. Hope of glorious day.

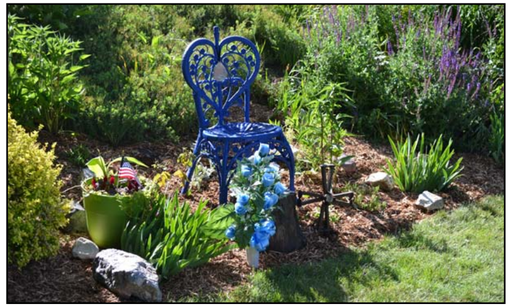
I remember the Good Friday crocuses. My skin warmed to the morning sun. I heard the robins. A breeze played with my hair. I saw the crocus, and pictured the coming daffodils. I imagined the unfolding of the season, plant by plant.

This Easter morning, I think again of the crocus photo. *That photo did not fail me.*

As I pointed and clicked again and again, my heart's desire was not to preserve the crocus, but the moment—that sense of coming spring which lit my heart, for one brief and shining moment.

Seated in the sanctuary this Easter morning, that crocus joy wells up again. I am flooded once more with a moment of iridescent hope.

Memorial



On this Memorial Day I have put out flowers for someone I have never met.

And never will.

He died in our front yard three days ago.

My husband and I woke on Friday morning to find our front yard filled with officers. An accident had happened during the night, the sheriff told us. He asked if we had heard anything. We hadn't.

A grey Honda Accord had missed a curve, slid sideways into our birch tree. The birch, shorn of seven feet of bark on the impact side, still stood erect. The car had split in half, the two parts stopping fifteen feet apart from each other. Its driver, draped in a sheet, lay at the edge of a roadside flower bed.

For the next three hours I watched our front yard through the sun porch windows, transfixed. Officials blocked the road, took pictures, examined the car pieces, marked tire tracks, used surveying tools, and took notes. A few of the driver's friends and family arrived and watched numbly from the road. A pastor joined them.

One by one they left: medical examiner, ambulance, family, sheriff, deputies, detective, tow truck, and at length, the two highway patrolmen with their survey tools and camera.

I opened my front door and tiptoed through the yard. It had a few tire tracks where the car had hurtled from the road and a few more where the tow truck had dragged it out. Sprays of orange paint marked crucial locations. The car had flung housands of tiny glass shards across the entire front yard upon impact with the birch tree. The shards were barely visible. The yard looked far too normal for a site where in the night a gaping hole had been ripped in time and space.

The yard cried out for ritual. I ached for ceremony—something to mark a young man's unseen passage in the night.

I walked to the backyard and tugged up the cross I bought two years ago from a local artist, made from huge spikes of old railroad ties. A cross of giant nails, it had touched my heart. I moved the cross to the roadside bed, pushed it down into the orange paint that had marked the location of one end of the white sheet.

Over the weekend, I added a flag and an angel statue.

Today, I sprayed a wicker chair sky-blue instead of the bright red I'd planned for it. I set the chair behind the cross, then added a container of plants.

No, I never met him.

But I want to shape a memorial to mark his passing—however violent—with a faltering step toward . . .(dare I say it?) . . .toward holy ground.

Recovering Calvinist

It is early May, and each morning, I have been listening to *Moby Dick* as I cleaned last year's debris from my garden beds. At an April conference, Nobel-winning author Marilynne Robinson told us she had started reading John Calvin to understand the theological underpinnings of Herman Melville's classic novel.

"Read John Calvin. Read him twice," she advised her audience, gathered on the campus of Calvin College for the Festival of Faith and Writing. I had never read Calvin's Institutes, but then, I was not a theology major. I was, however, an English major, and I had never read *Moby Dick*. I have lifted that immense novel once or twice, waded through a page or two, and put it down. Its writing was dense, its sentences winding. Whaling ships and Captain Ahab's revenge at sea held no mystique for me.

En route home from the Michigan conference, I listened to a recording of Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* along with Hannah, a fellow English major whose degree was four decades younger than mine.

During a break in the reading, I confessed to Hannah the embarrassing *Moby Dick* gap in my literary repertoire. She confessed the same failing.

Inspired by the giddy heights of a literature conference, I resolved to listen to the book while gardening. Perhaps if I kept my hands busy while absorbing Melville's wandering prose at a slower, oral pace, I could stay interested. Back home, I googled "*Moby Dick* audio," stumbled across the Librivox recordings of classic literature, and began listening each morning as I gardened.

I pruned the arched branches of a Cotoneaster as the novel began, "Call me Ishmael. . . " I dug up a Cotoneaster twig that had arched to the ground and rooted. I potted it while Ishmael

consented to share a room with a cannibal named Queequeg. I uprooted young dandelions as both men boarded the Pequod, under the command of Captain Ahab. The 1851 Nantucket seaside merged with my Midwestern gardens.

I had thought this novel would be dark and dismal. But in the opening chapters, the narrator Ishmael—heard amid the emerging perennials—was a wry and witty Presbyterian.

Last night, I telephoned Hannah with the good news that I was making progress listening to the book—and actually enjoying it. She asked, "How many total hours in the recording?"

As a retiree, I live by kairos, not chronos time: I no longer need to parse my hours the way she does. I told her, "I don't know. I'm just taking it chapter by chapter."

She lamented, "Your progress increases my guilt!"

I lectured her: "You have another four decades before I will allow you a single ounce of guilt."

As chapter twenty ends today and I throw a third bin of weeds atop the refuse pile, I remember Hannah's question, uncase my Smartphone, and look ahead. Still 115 chapters left. I do the math. I have another twelve mornings in the garden to inhabit two worlds. I'll finish just in time for my annual plant sale. And after that?

I remember Marilynne Robinson's challenge: "Read John Calvin. Read him twice."

I am sure there is no audio recording of *The Institutes.* Even if there were, and even in this second adolescence in which I'm wondering what I will become as I grow old, I am sure Calvin's dense theological prose—which offers no imaginary whaling trip and no Nantucket—shall remain forever beyond my reach.

Besides, I am weary of this multitasking. It belongs in measured chronos time, not in the easy ebb and flow of retirement living.

Tomorrow I will console Hannah with news of the new verbal mountain that—even in the kairos retirement years—will remain unconquered.

And I shall tell her without guilt.

Chain Reaction

A chain reaction started with a two-sentence phone message from Carolyn: “Do you have any of those plants with purple flowers that look like orchids? My friend told me she got hers from you.”

When I returned Carolyn’s call, I asked if she meant the plants with long green leaves and purple flowers on even longer stems.

She did.

“Ah. . . that’s Streptocarpus, you want.”

“Streptocarpus?” she said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

I chuckled. “It sounds like a disease, doesn’t it?” I said, and added. “I don’t know if they are related to orchids, but I do know that they are cousins of African violets.”

The two houseplants are classified the same Kingdom, Order, and Family, but a different Genus: Streptocarpus and Saintpaulia. Streptocarpus is best known by its genus name, although some growers affectionately call the plants “Streps.” Saintpaulia, however, are best known by their common name: African Violets.

Two winters before, while searching online for remedies for my ailing African Violets, I stumbled upon photos of their plant cousins. I learned that Streps were easier to start and more forgiving than African Violets. “Once you’ve grown one Strep,” promised an Internet plant-lover, “You will be hooked forever.”

I found an online source, ordered a half-dozen tiny pots of strep. When those six starters had matured, I harvested their bottom leaves, cut these into pieces, and started new ones. When each vein in those leaves rooted and gave birth to a baby strep, I was hooked.

Under the grow lights in my basement, I soon had an entire clan of Streps. I started selling this second generation of them to friends and neighbors. Carolyn had seen one of these.

After I she chuckled about their name, I was reluctant to promise her a Strep. That spring I had moved them to the sun porch, and then my gardening energy had moved outdoors.

“I have been neglecting them,” I said. “I’ll check if I have any healthy ones and call you back.”

When I checked, I was shocked: many of them looked seriously ill—as did their cousins. Most plants love the sunny sauna in my porch, but not those streps and violets. They prefer filtered light and cool temperatures. I decided to move them to the air-conditioned living room.

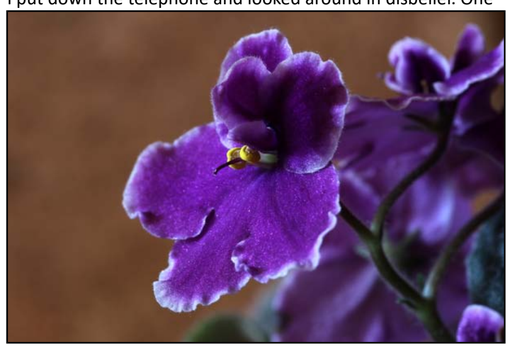
The living room is separated from the porch by a glass-block wall that keeps out the heat and filters the light. But I would need to move the sun porch futon that cast its shadow on a full one-third of the glass block wall.

I repositioned the futon, then the wicker chairs, and then the love seat. New locations for the weeping fig and philodendron were now required. Leaves dropped around me as I pushed, pulled, and sweated. The fallen leaves asked to be swept up. Then the ceramic tiles requested mopping, and the throw rugs whined for vacuuming. The Streps and violets begged for pruning before their move to the living room.

A half day later, dripping sweat, I called Carolyn. “I have some blooming streptocarpus,” I said. “They are not picture-perfect, but they are presentable.”

She said she would love even an imperfect Strep. She would would stop for it tomorrow.

I put down the telephone and looked around in disbelief. One phone call had triggered a two-room overhaul.



And that overhaul had its roots in an Internet discovery of Streptocarpus two years before.

And the Streptocarpus project was launched following disappointments with African Violets, given to me by a friend who had a north window filled with them.

And she. . .

Given enough time, I could have traced the chain back to Adam and Eve and the fig leaves.

But I didn’t. I had already exceeded my daily chain-reaction quota.

I took a cool shower and then enjoyed the air-conditioned living room, along with those plant cousins.

I wilt in sunny saunas, too. It runs in the family.