Afterword

Gardener Poets

> I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
> And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
> Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
> And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
>
> —William Butler Yeats

Unlike Yeats, who was neither from the Pacific Northwest nor himself a gardener, poets hereabouts often speak of their avocation of gardening. We would expect no less of those who happen to live in our bioregion with its extended growing season under a temperate climate and, whether rural or urban, housing arrangements that usually include enough sun and space for gardens. We hasten to say at the outset that we are speaking not of farmer-poets who raise food for market, but of gardener-poets, those who maintain "kitchen gardens" for home use. Strange to say, we almost never read published poems written from the perspective of such gardeners, and we hardly ever receive their poems at *Windfall*. We would like to encourage poets of the Pacific Northwest to put down their shovels, rakes, and trowels long enough to bring their gardener-perspectives into poetry.

Because there seem to be few examples of poets who have made gardening a significant element of their work, we can ask how the poet who happens to be a gardener can approach the project of integrating the avocation into poems. Some preliminary and inspirational thinking on this is provided by Robert Pogue Harrison in his recent book, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Harrison, a professor of Italian literature at Stanford who says gardening is "something I might do more of in my retirement," writes books that explore literary and philosophical sources for what they have to tell us about how we live now in relation to fundamental structural conditions, such as forests, dead ancestors, and gardens.

Harrison begins his treatise on gardens by citing the "powerful hold that the goddess Cura has on human nature." The story of Cura, or Care, is told by the obscure Roman mythographer Gaius Julius Hyginus (c. 64 BCE—CE 17) in a single paragraph:

> Once when Care was crossing a river, she saw some clay; she thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it. While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter came by. Care asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted. But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it, he forbade this, and demanded that it be given his name instead. While Care and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and desired that her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body. They asked Saturn to be their arbiter, and he made the following decision, which seemed a just one: "Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at its death; and since you, Earth, have given its body, you shall receive its body. But since Care first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives. And because there is now a dispute among you as to its name, let it be called *homo,* for it is made out of *humus* (earth)." (Harrison 5-6)

Throughout his book, Harrison treats Care as the patron goddess of gardeners. Since a humanly created garden requires time to come into being, it has to be planned by the gardener, seeded and cultivated, and then harvested. That is, the garden requires the gardener's care day by day. "The true gardener," says Harrison, "is always 'the constant gardener.'" Thus, following Hyginus's myth, Care shall possess the gardener as long as he or she lives. As Czech author Karel Čapek (1890-1938) puts it, "The life of a gardener is full of change and active will."

Following Čapek, who in 1929 published a book called *The Gardener's Year,* Harrison says the gardener is the one who above all cultivates soil. In both the myth of Cura and the Garden of Eden, man is made of clay, and clay is the primal dead substance where gardening begins, as described by Čapek:

> clay like lead, squelching and primeval clay out of which coldness oozes; which yields under the spade like chewing-gum, which bakes in the sun and gets sour in the shade; ill-tempered, unmalleable, greasy, and sticky like plaster of Paris, slippery like a snake, and dry like a brick, impermeable like tin, and heavy like lead. (88)

Anyone who has started a garden from scratch in the Willamette Valley, or almost anywhere on flood plains in the Pacific Northwest, knows the epic struggle with clay. Years of digging compost and sources of nitrogen into the soil—that is, the constancy of Care—are required to turn clay into the black gold of humus, from which the subsequent life of the garden will spring.

By turning clay into humus, Harrison says (again following Čapek) that the gardener's basic ethical experience is this: "You must give more to the soil than you take away." Harrison adds:

> What holds true for the soil . . . also holds true for nations, institutions, marriage, friendship, education, in short for human culture as a whole, which comes into being and maintains itself in time only as long as its cultivators overgive of themselves. (33)

Harrison contrasts this overgiving with the relationship of modern technology to the soil, wherein the drive is to "extract, remove, and deplete rather than to cultivate, enhance, and foster." That is, the amassing of power through technology takes away more than it gives back.

In the spirit of giving resides the governing metaphor of gardening in relation to poetry: The care that a gardener brings to a garden resonates elsewhere in human culture and individual psyche:

MULCHING

Me in my bugproof netted headpiece kneeling
to spread sodden newspapers between broccolis,
corn sprouts, cabbages and four kinds of beans,

prostrate before old suicide bombings, starvation,
AIDS, earthquakes, the unforeseen tsunami,
front-page photographs of lines of people

with everything they own heaped on their heads,
the rich assortment of birds trilling on all
sides of my forest garden, the exhortations

of commencement speakers at local colleges,
the first torture revelations under my palms
and I a helpless citizen of a country

I used to love, who as a child wept when
the brisk police band bugled *Hats off! The flag*
is passing by, now that every wanton deed

in this stack of newsprint is heartbreak,
my blackened fingers can only root in dirt,
turning up industrious earthworms, bits

of unreclaimed eggshell, wanting to ask
the earth to take my unquiet spirit,
bury it deep, make compost of it.

—Maxine Kumin

At the end of her poem, Kumin demonstrates an identity with the earth that is not usually characteristic of modernist poetry. The quintessential modernist T. S. Eliot speaks of an "objective correlative," defined as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" or inward state of mind that the artist is seeking to convey. However, Harrison thinks that for some artists, "a state of mind is consubstantial with an external element or place, rather than merely correlated with it according to rules of analogy or representation." Such a condition of direct identity with place more

exactly characterizes the perspective a gardener-poet would bring to his or her art.

Harrison believes that a gardener perspective would carry us beyond modernism, which he considers has outlived its purpose:

> In general . . . I am prepared to say that while I consider myself an heir to the cultural history of modernity, I believe that modernism, for lack of a better term, has been mostly a story of combating and denouncing history, rather than cultivating, in sheltered places, counterforces to history's deleterious forces. (159)

Much as one might appreciate and value the work of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (and we editors at *Windfall* grew up being taught to stand in awe of them), Harrison has a point that their work was a large critique of the culture that brought World Wars, Depression, and human suffering on a global scale. As Harrison puts it, "Modernism found its objective correlative in the wasteland rather than the garden." We at *Windfall* wonder if modernism, like so many other cultural features around us, may indeed be a transitory anomaly in time—yet another feature of the century-old Age of Cheap Oil that seems to be passing from the earth. Maxine Kumin in her poem offers an implied critique of the human-generated evils of our time, but her perspective is that of the gardener, as close to the earth as compost.

Harrison calls for the cultivation of renewal in "sheltered places," places where the human engages the annual round of nature, not to control it, but to identify with it. Michael Pollan refers to the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed space that defines most gardens by separating them by fence or wall from either the urban surround or wild nature.

Many poets who are drawn to write of the natural world feel an understandable repugnance at forcing nature to do our human bidding, to make the earth say "beans" instead of whatever it was going to say. Their interest is in going to less human-influenced places and trying to hear what is in the wind, the soil, the flora and fauna, and to carry it to their poetry. Their task is observing, witnessing, without participating. The way that nurseries and garden centers present gardening often

increases such poets' reluctance to engage the soil, if it requires toxic petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides and the purchase of yet more consumer items like stakes and trellises and pruning shears and trowels. And then there's the introduction and cultivation of nonnative species—lettuce, cucumbers, carrots, garlic—often brought from not only another bioregion but also from another continent entirely. Understandably, most nature poets tend to draw upon wild places.

At *Windfall*, though, consistent with our emphasis on place, we have tried to encourage poetry of urban places as well as wild places. And it would seem to naturally follow that a poetry of gardens would come to define and explore that borderland between the wild and urban, the *hortus conclusus*, where the human comes fully into focus.

Harrison asserts that "A gardener . . . espouses the cause of what he cultivates . . . . He is committed to the welfare of what he nourishes to life in his garden." Here we find the fullest extension of Care. When you visit a gardener at home, the first thing he or she will want to do is show you the garden, and then that same gardener is likely to become distracted by thinning, picking, or pulling a weed.

Old Florist

That hump of a man bunching chrysanthemums
Or pinching-back asters, or planting azaleas,
Tamping and stamping dirt into pots,—
How he could flick and pick
Rotten leaves or yellowy petals,
Or scoop out a weed close to flourishing roots,
Or make the dust buzz with a light spray,
Or drown a bug in one spit of tobacco juice,
Or fan life into wilted sweet-peas with his hat,
Or stand all night watering roses, his feet blue in rubber
boots.

—Theodore Roethke

Harrison also contrasts the gardener's perspective with the cult of consumerism that has seemed to dominate life from mid-twentieth century until now. Harrison borrows the phrase "more life" from Lionel Trilling to characterize our craving to turn the earth into "a consumerist paradise where everything is given spontaneously, without labor, suffering, or husbandry":

> Our attempts to re-create Eden amount to an assault on creation. That is the danger of the era. Precisely because our frenzy is fundamentally aimless while remaining driven, we set ourselves goals whose main purpose is to keep the frenzy going until it consummates itself in sloth. If at present we are seeking to render the totality of the earth's resources endlessly available, endlessly usable, endlessly disposable, it is because endless consumption is the proximate goal of a production without end. Or better, consumption is what justifies the frenzy of production, which in turn justifies consumption, the entire cycle serving more to keep us busy than to satisfy our real needs. (165)

Harrison summarizes philosopher Martin Heidegger's characterization of this condition as "our blind demand for aimless activity—a demand that arises from our unacknowledged suffering from, and denial of, the emptiness of Being."

The activity of Roethke's old florist is anything but a frenzy of aimless activity, and instead shows purpose in every gesture. In fact, the gardener's perspective aims at fullness of Being, bringing human dimensions and boundaries to nature, and the fusion of place and soul. The poet Barbara Drake shows us the care (the work) and fullness of Being in a Northwest locale:

CUTTINGS

He builds a mountain
of grape cuttings, dead wood
from last winter's pruning.
It's November and the rain

has soaked the ground so it's safe
to burn. Hard to start
but he works on it all afternoon
until the pile of discarded vines
is aflame. This year's harvest
was late, just six weeks ago.
Here and there, a few stray grapes still hang,
withered and pecked by birds,
but the yellow leaves have fallen.

After work, I go out with a glass of wine
and cheese toast with onion, pull up a chair to the fire
and sit with him, admiring the pile of ash.
Red snakes of fire run through it.
The bottle lamb, grown now,
wanders into the vineyard
but it's okay, the remains are all hers.

It feels good to sit here
drinking last year's wine,
watching the gaunt moon
and feeling the heat of the fire.
There's no wind—
the smoke goes straight up,
like an offering.

The place that Barbara is writing about is the farm she shares with her husband, Bill Beckman, near Yamhill, Oregon. "Cuttings" concerns the raising of grapes, and this distinguishes Barbara and Bill from the kind of gardener who raises flowers and ornamental plants only. Gardeners who raise food are a breed apart, and the quality of their care is measured more starkly in terms of success or failure. And yet, Karel Čapek frames the ultimate gardener's perspective, faith in the annual cycle: "I tell you, there is no death; not even sleep. We only pass from

one season to another. We must be patient with life, for it is eternal."

The poet in the Pacific Northwest for whom vegetable gardening is the most conspicuous element of his work (as opposed to the occasional poem) is undoubtedly Charles Goodrich of Corvallis, Oregon. For many years he was a professional gardener for the city of Corvallis, and he has written of that experience in poems such as "A Lecture on Aphids" and "Spring Day at the County Courthouse" in his 2003 book, *Insects of South Corvallis.* However, more recently Goodrich has identified his art with the art of vegetable gardening at home. In 2007 he produced a chapbook called *Heavy Mulching: Eleven Dispatches from the Garden*, a selection of prose poems from a much longer series he is currently working on.

Cold Soil

I'm listening to the latest returns on the radio. The country seems bent on re-electing greed. To salvage the hour, I break up my garlic, slitting the skin around the neck with a paring knife, pressing my thumbs in beside the stem, prying out one clove at a time. As I drop each clove into the bowl, I mutter a string of prayers and curses—breaking up garlic as an irreverent rosary.

I have to plant this garlic before dark. The moon is not right, the weather is against me, but I need to put my hands in the dirt today—need to sow *something*. I'd be smarter to wait a few days until the rain lets up, but I can't wait. Some things can only be sown into coldness.

I pry open another head, and another. Dear holy earth, transform my anger into compassion. Or at least into garlic.

In a poem like this—and Goodrich has several—the gardener's perspective can be brought to bear on anything within the garden space or upon the world outside. Here the outside is represented by a poisonous election, for which planting garlic is the antidote, but in

another poem called "Ground Zero" the outside consists of the events of 9/11. Sometimes his gardener's perspective never leaves the house, as in late autumn when the gardening ends for the year, or in winter when the seed catalogs arrive. Always he integrates his humor, which appears to be an essential character trait of the gardener, from Karel Čapek to Michael Pollan. Putting one's hands in the dirt (especially to raise food) is a joyful counter to greed, mayhem and hubris. To raise and harvest that garlic and use it in cooking constitutes total satisfaction and meaning. The process of the garden from the gardener's perspective is evoked in Goodrich's poem in this issue, "Music to Garden By."

As Harrison says, "This self-extension of the gardener into care is an altogether different ethic from the one that drives the present age to crave more life and to escape what Heidegger calls the emptiness of Being through a jacked-up productivity." In the garden nature itself is the source of "jacked-up productivity," while the gardener, as Michael Pollan notes, "plays the role of natural selection . . . both . . . hatching the trials and then culling the errors." That is, the gardener functions like an artist, working with nature to produce beauty, spending years to learn how to interpret the "genius" of a particular place, and in the best of all possible worlds, Candide tending his garden even produces food.

Where are the poems of the gardener poets? At *Windfall* we need them to be local in flora and climate, set in the Pacific Northwest as clearly as possible. And we need them now, redolent with care. One form of care is removing weeds, and weeding has been a conflicted practice, beginning with Thoreau, who thought that weeds had as much right to the garden as vegetables. Others like Michael Pollan know that weeds are far more aggressive than native and domesticated species, and the latter need all the help they can get, as in this poem by Paulann Petersen:

AS FALL DAYS CONTINUE THEIR ONWARD COUNT

I wrap myself in a garment of summer
that carries me back

to the huge garden plot
I tended for years, then left behind
years ago. Far away,

three hundred miles south
and east of here, I carry
a hoe into rows of sweet corn—
chopping at chickweed, purslane, quackgrass,
at sprouts of plantain. By hand I pull out

the interlopers hiding against
inch-thick stalks, then take a rake
to the path of soft dirt
between each row. Rake and step,
rake and step. But not

heedful enough. I have walked
on the earth I so carefully smoothed.
The corn is in tassel. Pollen drifts, thick—
yellow filling each footprint.
Who knows what grows there now.

Here Petersen, who lives in Portland, remembers her gardening days near Klamath Falls. Memory serves as the basis for the poem, in which weeding assumes an aesthetic scale, as a metaphor for the artful control of circumstances that the early career phase of life requires.

In our afterword to the fall 2005 issue of *Windfall*, we wrote about peak oil and the poetry of place, and we suggested that in the not-too-distant future, when oil becomes scarce, more of us will be engaged with the production of food. We offered examples of poetry about farming from Virgil to Wendell Berry and Barbara Drake. As the oil-based long-distance transportation of food diminishes and sources of food become more localized, home gardening will become more important. Indeed, as the economy continues to contract, we shall all become gardeners. We

may also write more directly from our experience in the garden, giving that experience the attention in poetry that it so richly deserves.

The editors of *Windfall* are both gardeners, and Siverly has developed over the years a garden based on a dozen large mounds. One of these mounds was devoted for a few seasons to the raising of bush beans. As it happened, the number of rows that naturally fit on this particular mound turned out to be nine. Having known Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" long before he ever planted a garden of his own, Siverly began to wonder whether the nine rows had been unconsciously suggested by the poem. The following season he tried planting ten rows, but that led to an overcrowded and less productive mound; so the next year, he tried eight, but then he wondered why he should give up a whole row of beans that the mound could clearly support. In the end, conceding to the "genius of place," he returned to the original nine rows. Maybe there's a poem in this experience, or maybe Yeats (who had been inspired by Thoreau) had already captured the essence of it, as well as the deep sense of well-being that gardening can bring:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
> dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the
> cricket sings;
> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings.
>
> I will arise and go now, for always night and day
> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
> While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
> I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

Works referred to in this afterword

Karel Čapek. *The Gardener's Year*. 1929. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Barbara Drake. "Cuttings." *Small Favors*. Eugene: Traprock Books, 2003. 33.

T. S. Eliot. "Hamlet and His Problems." *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964. 95-103.

Charles Goodrich. "Cold Soil." *Heavy Mulching: Eleven Dispatches from the Garden*. Corvallis: Knot House Press, 2007.

Charles Goodrich. *Insects of South Corvallis*. Corvallis: Cloudbank Books, 2003.

Robert Pogue Harrison. *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Maxine Kumin. "Mulching." *Still to Mow*. New York: Norton, 2007. 15.

Paulann Petersen. "As Fall Days Continue Their Onward Count." *Kindle*. Eugene: Mountains and Rivers Press, 2008. 15.

Michael Pollan. *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. New York: Grove Press, 1991.

Theodore Roethke. "The Old Florist." *The Collected Poems*. New York: Anchor-Random House, 1975. 40.

W. B. Yeats. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1966. 117.