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# Green Thumb

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Green Thumb · *Diane Wakoski*

*How can we trace this?  
genetically*

There are two Pearls  
in my mother's family. Both  
eccentric  
independent  
and gardeners.  
They were not related. I don't actually know  
if they even  
knew each other.  
From two different generations.  
But oddly similar. Both had warbly,  
marblely voices, not deep  
but grating, and full of abrasive  
sounds. And both  
had hands and fingernails  
always stained  
with earth.

Auntie Pearl was a relative by marriage of my Aunt Ella's  
that lady who bloomed fast  
like an early rose  
and fell and faded as quickly  
her young husband dead  
on his motorcycle  
and she, left alone with two daughters  
and work in an aircraft factory during WW II,  
and her husband's brother and sister,  
Uncle Noah &  
Auntie Pearl.

Auntie Pearl had a big old crumbling house  
which seemed jumbled with possessions,  
and I only  
remember sitting on her screened porch  
with the feel of hundreds of plants  
surrounding me,  
healthy but, like Auntie Pearl, ungroomed,  
full of dead leaves, which she never removed, all climbing and

growing out of their pots,  
or living in ragged beds she never  
beautified,

only allowed to have a  
rampant  
growth.

She was one of those adults who acted as if life were full of dangerous  
secrets,  
and had conversations in which much alluding,  
rolling of eyeballs and hushed voice  
were used. I felt  
around Auntie Pearl  
that she saw everyone's life  
overgrown  
as her plants,  
the world dark, damp, hiding the  
unknown in its deep green foliage,  
and like Uncle Noah and Aunt Ella,  
Auntie Pearl belonged to a Holy Roller church,  
and thus she did see  
almost everything worldly  
as a sin.

Still, I never felt she really understood  
the beautiful nature of plants,  
that she had deliberately created a jungle,  
a crawling Garden of Eden,  
where one might have to sin  
just in order to come out of the brambles.  
Pearl—how unlike a pearl Auntie Pearl was.  
Yet, she had the gift of the garden,  
even though she really didn't understand  
plants  
at all.

Always,  
I was frightened of her,  
as if that tangled, steaming, overgrown life  
had borne her as a carnivorous plant,  
as if she had jaw-like traps at the ends of her leaves,  
ready to spring on an insect,  
or as if she were one of the tiny sundew plants which grow in sub-arctic  
bogs,  
or a pitcher plant or cobra lily full of fluid which both attracts and  
dissolves

the insects which are drawn to it.  
No wonder I remember Auntie Pearl:  
she must have owned Southern California's Garden of Eden.

The other family Pearl  
was the second wife of one of my cousins.  
To children  
in whatever time or place  
divorce  
will always be a secret, an  
activity surrounded by mystery.  
It is a time when adults whisper  
about sex,  
and enumerate its offenses,  
and otherwise chunky, lifeless, unappealing adults  
at once  
become imbued with Gothic lives. Mr.  
Rochester  
who was just cranky old Uncle Noah  
with foodstains on his tie  
takes on intrigue  
when you hear about the secret Mrs. Rochester  
who was crazy  
and, locked up in her room, set fire to the house  
and burned to her death.  
I think that's what I felt about Uncle Noah, who was a junk dealer,  
and Auntie Pearl, proprietress of  
The Garden of Eden.

Pearl,  
the 2nd Pearl,  
with perky sausage curls and shiny pumps  
always reminded me of Little Lulu's aunt.  
And while my Aunt Eva had hated her son's first wife, Milly,  
she hated even more  
divorce,  
and of course detested any new woman  
her son might try marriage with  
again.  
But it was Pearl's green thumb  
which finally united this waitress into the family,  
all farmers manqué,

who had left the potato fields to have  
better lives  
but never lost their allegiance  
to dirt.  
So while my Aunt Eva painted china  
and collected salt and pepper shakers  
until  
she had over five thousand pairs,  
she also subscribed to *The Farm Journal*,  
and daughter-in-law Pearl gardened  
gardened,  
growing her prize-winning African Violets.

Though Auntie Pearl is remembered for not having a husband,  
and Pearl because she married my cousin,  
I think of both of them  
as women alone in the world,  
and remember my mother—  
    who loved to hint at the failures of others,  
    as if hinting rather than telling gave her graciousness and goodwill,  
    whereas it only made her seem  
    sly, and more petty—  
hinting that Pearl's husband had become an alcoholic after he retired.  
Her phrase was that he  
    "liked to bend his elbow"  
too well, and she  
hinted that he left home each morning  
and went to the Benevolent & Paternal Order of Elks where he drank  
    all day,  
just to get away from Pearl's African Violets  
and the garden club work  
which filled her life.

I don't know:  
plants seem like the best kind of companions  
to me, rewarding care and attention  
and sometimes  
even  
neglect  
with new shapes and interesting developments.

So, I wonder about the two Pearls,  
and my family's image of them  
dirt-stained hands,  
their marblely country voices,  
one hinting that everything was sex, overgrown and voluptuous,  
the other marrying for it, and perhaps finding her husband  
would rather  
"bend his elbow" at the BPOE?

Plants come in somehow  
when those other parts of sexual life fail.  
I gratefully accept  
that reality, knowing well how our bodies  
fail us,  
and wondering if my mother understands that her  
failures have something to do  
with her elderly house,  
empty of all plants, even  
African Violets,  
which she  
used to grow so easily,  
and which bloomed for her  
practically untended,  
while my Aunt Eva fumed and fussed  
that hers  
(which by implication received meticulous care)  
never got a bud on them.

Constantly juggling.  
What we have.  
What we don't have.  
The pearls formed in my family out of irritations.  
Family jewels,  
in a rugged Protestant world?