

*The Wild Iris*

B Y

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T H E   E C C O   P R E S S

I couldn't do it again,  
I can hardly bear to look at it—

in the garden, in light rain  
the young couple planting  
a row of peas, as though  
no one has ever done this before,  
the great difficulties have never as yet  
been faced and solved—

They cannot see themselves,  
in fresh dirt, starting up  
without perspective,  
the hills behind them pale green, clouded with flowers—

She wants to stop;  
he wants to get to the end,  
to stay with the thing—

Look at her, touching his cheek  
to make a truce, her fingers  
cool with spring rain;  
in thin grass, bursts of purple crocus—

even here, even at the beginning of love,  
her hand leaving his face makes  
an image of departure

and they think  
they are free to overlook  
this sadness.

## THE HAWTHORN TREE

Side by side, not  
hand in hand: I watch you  
walking in the summer garden—things  
that can't move  
learn to see; I do not need  
to chase you through  
the garden; human beings leave  
signs of feeling  
everywhere, flowers  
scattered on the dirt path, all  
white and gold, some  
lifted a little by  
the evening wind; I do not need  
to follow where you are now,  
deep in the poisonous field, to know  
the cause of your flight, human  
passion or rage: for what else  
would you let drop  
all you have gathered?

## LOVE IN MOONLIGHT

Sometimes a man or woman forces his despair  
on another person, which is called  
baring the heart, alternatively, baring the soul—  
meaning for this moment they acquired souls—  
outside, a summer evening, a whole world  
thrown away on the moon: groups of silver forms  
which might be buildings or trees, the narrow garden  
where the cat hides, rolling on its back in the dust,  
the rose, the coreopsis, and, in the dark, the gold  
dome of the capitol  
converted to an alloy of moonlight, shape  
without detail, the myth, the archetype, the soul  
filled with fire that is moonlight really, taken  
from another source, and briefly  
shining as the moon shines: stone or not,  
the moon is still that much of a living thing.

*No one's despair is like my despair—*

You have no place in this garden  
thinking such things, producing  
the tiresome outward signs; the man  
pointedly weeding an entire forest,  
the woman limping, refusing to change clothes  
or wash her hair.

Do you suppose I care  
if you speak to one another?  
But I mean you to know  
I expected better of two creatures  
who were given minds: if not  
that you would actually care for each other  
at least that you would understand  
grief is distributed  
between you, among all your kind, for me  
to know you, as deep blue  
marks the wild scilla, white  
the wood violet.

Because in our world  
something is always hidden,  
small and white,  
small and what you call  
pure, we do not grieve  
as you grieve, dear  
suffering master; you  
are no more lost  
than we are, under  
the hawthorn tree, the hawthorn holding  
balanced trays of pearls: what  
has brought you among us  
who would teach you, though  
you kneel and weep,  
clasping your great hands,  
in all your greatness knowing  
nothing of the soul's nature,  
which is never to die: poor sad god,  
either you never have one  
or you never lose one.

## WITCHGRASS

Something  
comes into the world unwelcome  
calling disorder, disorder—

If you hate me so much  
don't bother to give me  
a name: do you need  
one more slur  
in your language, another  
way to blame  
one tribe for everything—

as we both know,  
if you worship  
one god, you only need  
one enemy—

I'm not the enemy.  
Only a ruse to ignore  
what you see happening  
right here in this bed,  
a little paradigm  
of failure. One of your precious flowers  
dies here almost every day  
and you can't rest until  
you attack the cause, meaning

whatever is left, whatever  
happens to be sturdier  
than your personal passion—

It was not meant  
to last forever in the real world.  
But why admit that, when you can go on  
doing what you always do,  
mourning and laying blame,  
always the two together.

I don't need your praise  
to survive. I was here first,  
before you were here, before  
you ever planted a garden.  
And I'll be here when only the sun and moon  
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

## THE JACOB'S LADDER

Trapped in the earth,  
wouldn't you too want to go  
to heaven? I live  
in a lady's garden. Forgive me, lady;  
longing has taken my grace. I am  
not what you wanted. But  
as men and women seem  
to desire each other, I too desire  
knowledge of paradise—and now  
your grief, a naked stem  
reaching the porch window.  
And at the end, what? A small blue flower  
like a star. Never  
to leave the world! Is this  
not what your tears mean?

## MATINS

You want to know how I spend my time?  
I walk the front lawn, pretending  
to be weeding. You ought to know  
I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling  
clumps of clover from the flower beds: in fact  
I'm looking for courage, for some evidence  
my life will change, though  
it takes forever, checking  
each clump for the symbolic  
leaf, and soon the summer is ending, already  
the leaves turning, always the sick trees  
going first, the dying turning  
brilliant yellow, while a few dark birds perform  
their curfew of music. You want to see my hands?  
As empty now as at the first note.  
Or was the point always  
to continue without a sign?

What is my heart to you  
 that you must break it over and over  
 like a plantsman testing  
 his new species? Practice  
 on something else: how can I live  
 in colonies, as you prefer, if you impose  
 a quarantine of affliction, dividing me  
 from healthy members of  
 my own tribe: you do not do this  
 in the garden, segregate  
 the sick rose; you let it wave its sociable  
 infested leaves in  
 the faces of the other roses, and the tiny aphids  
 leap from plant to plant, proving yet again  
 I am the lowest of your creatures, following  
 the thriving aphid and the trailing rose— Father,  
 as agent of my solitude, alleviate  
 at least my guilt; lift  
 the stigma of isolation, unless  
 it is your plan to make me  
 sound forever again, as I was  
 sound and whole in my mistaken childhood,  
 or if not then, under the light weight  
 of my mother's heart, or if not then,  
 in dream, first  
 being that would never die.

Like a protected heart,  
 the blood-red  
 flower of the wild rose begins  
 to open on the lowest branch,  
 supported by the netted  
 mass of a large shrub:  
 it blooms against the dark  
 which is the heart's constant  
 backdrop, while flowers  
 higher up have wilted or rotted;  
 to survive  
 adversity merely  
 deepens its color. But John  
 objects, he thinks  
 if this were not a poem but  
 an actual garden, then  
 the red rose would be  
 required to resemble  
 nothing else, neither  
 another flower nor  
 the shadowy heart, at  
 earth level pulsing  
 half maroon, half crimson.

## FIELD FLOWERS

What are you saying? That you want  
eternal life? Are your thoughts really  
as compelling as all that? Certainly  
you don't look at us, don't listen to us,  
on your skin  
stain of sun, dust  
of yellow buttercups: I'm talking  
to you, you staring through  
bars of high grass shaking  
your little rattle— O  
the soul! the soul! Is it enough  
only to look inward? Contempt  
for humanity is one thing, but why  
disdain the expansive  
field, your gaze rising over the clear heads  
of the wild buttercups into what? Your poor  
idea of heaven: absence  
of change. Better than earth? How  
would you know, who are neither  
here nor there, standing in our midst?

## THE RED POPPY

The great thing  
is not having  
a mind. Feelings:  
oh, I have those; they  
govern me. I have  
a lord in heaven  
called the sun, and open  
for him, showing him  
the fire of my own heart, fire  
like his presence.  
What could such glory be  
if not a heart? Oh my brothers and sisters,  
were you like me once, long ago,  
before you were human? Did you  
permit yourselves  
to open once, who would never  
open again? Because in truth  
I am speaking now  
the way you do. I speak  
because I am shattered.



## CLOVER

What is dispersed  
among us, which you call  
the sign of blessedness  
although it is, like us,  
a weed, a thing  
to be rooted out—

by what logic  
do you hoard  
a single tendril  
of something you want  
dead?

If there is any presence among us  
so powerful, should it not  
multiply, in service  
of the adored garden?

You should be asking  
these questions yourself,  
not leaving them  
to your victims. You should know  
that when you swagger among us  
I hear two voices speaking,  
one your spirit, one  
the acts of your hands.

## MATINS

Not the sun merely but the earth  
itself shines, white fire  
leaping from the showy mountains  
and the flat road  
shimmering in early morning: is this  
for us only, to induce  
response, or are you  
stirred also, helpless  
to control yourself  
in earth's presence—I am ashamed  
at what I thought you were,  
distant from us, regarding us  
as an experiment: it is  
a bitter thing to be  
the disposable animal,  
a bitter thing. Dear friend,  
dear trembling partner, what  
surprises you most in what you feel,  
earth's radiance or your own delight?  
For me, always  
the delight is the surprise.

## HEAVEN AND EARTH

Where one finishes, the other begins.  
On top, a band of blue; underneath,  
a band of green and gold, green and deep rose.

John stands at the horizon: he wants  
both at once, he wants  
everything at once.

The extremes are easy. Only  
the middle is a puzzle. Midsummer—  
everything is possible.

Meaning: never again will life end.

How can I leave my husband  
standing in the garden  
dreaming this sort of thing, holding  
his rake, triumphantly  
preparing to announce this discovery

as the fire of the summer sun  
truly does stall  
being entirely contained by  
the burning maples  
at the garden's border.

## THE DOORWAY

I wanted to stay as I was  
still as the world is never still,  
not in midsummer but the moment before  
the first flower forms, the moment  
nothing is as yet past—

not midsummer, the intoxicant,  
but late spring, the grass not yet  
high at the edge of the garden, the early tulips  
beginning to open—

like a child hovering in a doorway, watching the others,  
the ones who go first,  
a tense cluster of limbs, alert to  
the failures of others, the public falterings

with a child's fierce confidence of imminent power  
preparing to defeat  
these weaknesses, to succumb  
to nothing, the time directly

prior to flowering, the epoch of mastery

before the appearance of the gift,  
before possession.

## MIDSUMMER

How can I help you when you all want  
different things—sunlight and shadow,  
moist darkness, dry heat—

Listen to yourselves, vying with one another—

And you wonder  
why I despair of you,  
you think something could fuse you into a whole—

the still air of high summer  
tangled with a thousand voices

each calling out  
some need, some absolute

and in that name continually  
strangling each other  
in the open field—

For what? For space and air?  
The privilege of being  
single in the eyes of heaven?

You were not intended  
to be unique. You were  
my embodiment, all diversity

not what you think you see  
searching the bright sky over the field,  
your incidental souls  
fixed like telescopes on some  
enlargement of yourselves—

Why would I make you if I meant  
to limit myself  
to the ascendant sign,  
the star, the fire, the fury?