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Not a Rose

CHARTA

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Spicula linguarum anitum

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Parvolae partes ventris tauri, linguae anitum

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and counterpoint, pulsating with living and full of dying, momentary and enduring all at once, frozen in rock and open to what was not yet in time, flesh, and space.

Ever since last summer, washes of reds, blues, grays, yellows, purples, and blacks bring me back to the hot and subtle colors of the walk in the Painted Hills, where volcanic rocks, mortal hearts, vanished and present dogs, fossil grasses, that early July day's ebullient wildflowers, and human spouses knotted together in the ontological cat's cradle of ordinary "becoming with." Time contracts and dilates in the flesh of dogs, fossil and living; flowers, fossil and living; companions, fossil and living. We age like wine; we sporulate like yeast; we leaven worldings that extend before, through, and after us. We all – sedimented, thinking, feeling, walking, carrying – compose together the pigment-brushed traces in the hills of terran landscapes that are still at stake.

Flower Power

Mary Cappello

No segment of the natural world figures so consistently in human ritual as do flowers: people place flowers in their hair, hold them between their teeth, insert them into button holes, carry them close to their hearts, and intricately bestow them in ceremonies of birth, love, and death. To each state of the nation, its flower, and to each state of mind, its floral metaphor. Flowers inform whole histories of textiles, and of protest. Once deflowered, there is no going back. The Fall of Man had nothing to do with an apple and a serpent: it was the moment when the human, at one time floral, was forced to remember herself as dust, as clod.

Human burial grounds of the last two centuries, like Mount Auburn in Cambridge or West Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, are often horticultural wonderlands. We make the place we wander least into the most splendid of settings, transmuting the rot of death into lustrous groves of pacifying bloom. On a recent tour of one, I learned from my historian guide that funeral directors sometimes give the flowers that are left over from funerals to nearby old folks homes to display on bedside tables and in lunch rooms. Something about this attempt at recycling strikes me as perverse – as though it were assumed that those most proximate to the grave would be least likely to be marred by those death-imbued arrangements.

Flowers in a cemetery encourage bright remembrance, but in the ecologically "green" part, devoid of granite markers and where the departed are buried in sacks, the bodies of the deceased literally push up daisies. They remind us that all plant life is born of decomposed human and animal remains, even though the reverse does not maintain: humans are not born of flowers. Humans do not emerge from flowers, unless we live inside of Disney's *Water Babies Silly Symphonies* in which babies sleep inside of water lilies, glide inside of leaf-boats, and stroll naked beneath daisy parasols. Fundamental



Pinnae dorsales divisae lutjanorum campechanorum



Iubae gallinarum

strangers to the multiform petal power that is a flower, we shellac, and press and arrest live blooms inside of trinkets, paper-weights, or jewelry for our un-flower-like bodies, proud of our seeming ability to master a flower's tendency to droop and fade.

A flower-writer, on the other hand, need begin by acknowledging how circumscribed her own sense of the floral universe is by admitting into her purview flowers that grow out of lava, under water, on water, and in the Arctic, as well as those that open and close diurnally. Being bipeds rather than quadrupeds, we require flowers, and their fragrance, to waft up to us, never taking seriously the matter of whether they reach or weep, are heliotropic or keep close to the ground. To find a language *for* flowers rather than a language *of* flowers, I will need to bow to them and, listen: for the sound that is the flower, and the sounds inside the earth that produced it. Some crackling, rustling, swaying jingle brings a flower into existence and calls it "coral bells."

Light is life-giving, but shade is recuperative, and the power and solemn beauty of the shade garden, or flowers that in their greenness are indistinguishable from their plant must not be lost on me. So, too, other assumptions must be undone, like the idea that flowers and delicacy go hand in hand. Watching flowers survive eighty-mile-per-hour winds this spring, chilled to the bone, I finally understood that line of Shakespearean verse, "rough winds do shake the darling buds of May," and I understood spring anew, as well, as a season to survive rather than to frolic in.

Flowers are wrongly perceived as delicate when at heart they are robust; they are also imperceptibly silent where we expect them to be loud. Our language equates the florid and the floral with flourishes (in the sense of bombast) when actually flowers are vibrant absences, after-effects, and, paradoxically, harbingers of what had been (the seed, then plant, from which they spring).

My writing is a lot like my gardening: a battle between what I'm trying to cultivate and what appears in spite of my best effort, and exceeds it: the wild.

On a page in one rare flower-power book, a calyx literally intersects its name; flowers cross paths with their stems; leaves blot, or point like directional devices in a whimsically vertiginous universe. Emily Dickinson's *Herbarium* is more than a means of preservation. It's an abstract art, a geometry, and a hieroglyph. A wildly beautiful form of writing, the *Herbarium* makes broken rhymes out of the space between floral shapes and names.

Now we might wish to say a flower is the organ of a plant, its sex organs in particular, but I will maintain that a flower is a surface-producing light more akin to feathers than to skin. When a visitor touches the petals of my rare-to-open night-blooming cereus flower, I definitely feel embarrassed, even repulsed and ashamed. But it's not because the gesture publicizes something orgiastic. Dickinson wrote of "hyacinths that embarrass us by their loveliness." The flower is perfect. I am flawed. Flower power is its own form of silence and of undiscovered light. Dickinson knew this when she referred to flowers as "enameling the short dewy grass." It makes sense to me that her sister put one set of flowers in her hands, and another at her throat in her coffin – sites of voice and pen. I try to imagine the light those flowers must have emanated, glassy and unnameable, immune to preservation or shellac.⁶³