

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?