

William Blake's Garden

BY DUANE MICHAELS



William Blake would like my garden. It is a green mossy cabinet of floral curiosities where every ordinary bloom has a soul and is more bizarre than any black hole full of falling stars. Living people do not know that the glow of fireflies is the light of flower sprites' last good-byes before they die. Should children catch a firefly in a jar, that night will be dimmer by one star. With the first gleam of morning rays, the garden is a prism of a thousand hues refracted in tiny dots of crystal dew, a dazzling quilt of millefleur colors covering the sleeping flower beds. These bouquets seduce both butterflies and me with their siren scents and mesmerize my eyes with petal shapes that curve with the grace of adolescent thighs. Flowers construct the most charming geometries: circles like the sun, ovals, cones, curlicues and a variety of triangular eccentricities, which when viewed with the eye of a magnifying glass seem a Lilliputian frieze of psychedelic silhouettes.

Some blossoms twinkle in the gloaming's velvet shade and spiral flowers build their towers ever higher towards the ceiling of the sky to greet Icarus near the sun. Other creepers crawl like the tortoise, which left all alone soon toddles into every corner.

Posies pulse with a slight vibration, a sensation more sensed than seen by poets and their kind. It is a sign that in this place, as in heaven, all things grow with grace and are in rhyme. Most flowers have such lovely names, like hyacinth and Queen Anne's lace, though I do find spider wort and deadly nightshade sort of scary.



Alas, some flowers also use an alias: witch hazel's nom de plume is Hamamelis; foxglove also known as digitalis. Even the common dandelion changed its appellation from Dent-de-lion, its Gallic derivation. Metaphysicians know that the sounds of words can reverberate with a subtle power. In ancient Druid days, in the bleakest winter hours, shaman priests would offer up an incantation of floral names, a mantra chant to lure the sun's return so life would warm and grow, as it still does today.

In this green menagerie there are colors only bees can see, too slight for human sight. Some tones, like blitz blau and quark bone, can only be observed by ladybugs in the dark. Then there's the color grim, which, much like soot and pitch, is blacker than de Sade's sins; also shimmering reds and that translucent faithful opaline. The florets of the nearby fickle plant change color like a chameleon when tickled by a tender zephyr's touch-first tangerine, then zebra stripes, now true salmon pink with freckles of spotted blue. It seems as if a rainbow fell to earth here in a clump of colors each on top of one another.

Flowers are most natural in displaying their desires.
But sorcerers warn us to be wary of the lovely lithium, that
most cunning voluptuary. It arches its stamen in the air,
quivering with lust, and should your hand be passing there,
with the slightest touch you will be kissed with pollen dust.
If the garden troll should see this telltale mark, in a jealous
pique, he will cast a nasty spell and make you and your lover part.
When I take my midnight walk to see what secrets I can see,
the garden slumbers in July's full moonlight, washed in a haze
of lunar white as if there had been a summer's frost. I too look
the color of chalk. The garden is a nighttime negative of its
daylight self, and all is hushed but the cricket reveler's company.
In the shadow of a shadow, an invisible cat catches a mouse and
brings its trophy to the house. All seems quiet, calm, serene,
with posies cast as players in my midsummer night's dream;
poppy plays the part of Puck, a zinnia is the zany Bottom, and
daisy was all wrong as Oberon.



This should be the perfect moment for enlighten-ment, and that is why no light is seen, no sign is sent. Sometimes on a summer's noon, clouds bloat with moisture like swelling black balloons and burst with rain and thunder tunes. At first, drops of water fall so slowly you could count them one by one. Suddenly, a Hiroshige print deluge concentric circles crowd the mirror of the pond. Little pods form in the crotches of begonia's besotted leaves. and tree trunks shine like licorice sticks. Tiny fountains Splash everywhere, off every leaf waterfalsdrip, and little rivulets lick the budding stems.

Fissures appear in the yellow sedum paths, impromptu Streams with flotsam twigs Spin past, and monk's hoods curtsey in raucous gusts of wind.

Stoic robins sit in their jostled nests, while enduring nature's tantrum test. Even jack-in-his-pulpit isn't dry, and I stand under the cherry tree drenched in the silver rain, at last noticing that Iam wet.

This monologue which you have read of my jardin extraordinaire has been but prologue to a secret which I now share. Of all the wonders in this wondrous domain, where I reign the gardener king, the flower I love most is the Lycoris, the mysterious Resurrection lily: that perfect symbol of the Christian myth. This bloom, in a feat more amazing than Houdini's gifts, sprouts in June such lush green foliage, then retreats and vanishes as if it had been just a memory in a forgotten dream. And where it was, nothing now is seen. Then all at once in late August's heat, tall leafless stalks crowned with iridescent pink and purple blossoms burst from their purgatory in the earth. This arcane ad of nature, though perceived by us as ordinary, is a manifestation of Maya's phantom play, the great immensity expressed in every way. My garden is the universe. I am the universe. I am my garden. All things are the same.