

Gardening

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Gardening

Frank'd kill for his own garden—green
seasons, pistil, black loam
crumbling in his fingers like
an ice sheet in a warm world.

Below him, fifteen storeys of concrete,
hard-edged shadows that hide
the sun and climate control
that withers anything he plants.

His favourite place
is the herbarium of the city's Botanic Gardens—one day
he picks a rare orchid and smuggles
it home under his shirt. The stain it leaves
stamps a craving in his skin,
a want that won't fade.

He searches the city for another—but it's February
and the florists only have roses. One night,
he finds his flower pinned to the wall
of a tattoo parlour and it inspires
a garden grown in his skin.

Prue from *Full Fathom* plants that first flower
on his chest
with a whirring harrow and ink
fertilised with blood.

The garden grows. Pay cheques and pain
order each season's planting. Protea
among heather, a cosmos once extinct
now preserved in shallow skin.

An avenue of oaks climbs his thighs
to a vanishing point

in his crotch. He plants until his skin
overflows—colour curling behind his ears and over
the hills of his buttocks, ghost orchids
in the secret spaces

between his toes. Time stretches the garden,
flowers sag and droop—patches become overgrown.
Resisting this last season, he makes plans
to replant his garden—at The Green Hills Memorial Park,
where new flowers will bloom.



Figure 1: Untitled. From the Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden for Painters, c. 1801/1825.
Woodblock print on paper. Anonymous, Japan.
Wikimedia Commons, Source: 4wHX9cPLYOiSJA at Google Cultural Institute.

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Some days, Frank feels he would kill for his own garden—kill for black loam crumbling in his fingers, his own green seasons, pistil and stamen. But including today's casualties, 43 indoor pot plants have died in Frank's care. His small apartment, where everything has its place, kills plants. Perhaps it is the 24 stories of concrete below him, perhaps the hard-edged shadows that hide the sun or it could be the climate control with its 32 settings. Whatever it is, the trend line of plant deaths on Frank's chart is straight and rises without relief.

Frank enjoys reviewing his spreadsheets before bed. It calms him. He checks tasks completed, tracks long-term trends and tweaks the next day's activities. His plant death data spoil his pleasure. He tries everything: deep watering, shallow watering, special soil additives, humidifiers, dehumidifiers, lamps that mimic direct sunlight, lamps that mimic dappled sunlight and once, a regime of no light at all. Nothing changes the pot plant mortality rate.

Frank finishes tomorrow's agenda. His stride is definitely getting longer. He will get off the tram the stop before the National Gallery to make sure he completes 10,550 steps, even though it will add an extra three minutes to his travel time. He adds today's two dead plants.

Frank is not familiar with loss. He is an archivist at the National Gallery. If he classifies something, it says classified. Nothing vanishes without permission. Nothing dies. At work, he aims at permanence. At home, he just wants a garden. As the dead increase, his once happy lunchtime visits to the herbarium of the city's Botanic Gardens, taunt him with tangles of successful growth.

Today at the herbarium, Frank follows the crowd to see a rare *Arethusa* orchid that has flowered for the first time. It is beautiful. Leafless, large purple flowers stand with white crests. Already late for a meeting, Frank waits until the lunchtime crowd disperses and comes close enough to touch the orchid. He wants it. He wants it in his apartment where he can enjoy it alone. He leans forward to sniff a flower and quickly picks it. He hides it under his shirt, against his skin. Gently holding his side, he walks towards the exit and

back to work. He feels the flower against his skin for the rest of the day and it consoles him.

Frank fills a vase with water as soon as he gets home. He lifts his shirt to recover the Arethusa. The flower is crushed and dead. Frank slowly lifts the lid of the rubbish bin and lays it to rest. He wonders if this death should be added to his spreadsheet. But while undressing for his shower, he notices a dark red stain on his belly where the flower had been. It does not wash off and after his shower, Frank carefully towels the area dry. He feels that the flower still lives in his skin. The stain is there the next morning. He imagines he can feel a cool flower against his skin all day.

Over the next three days Frank avoids rubbing or washing his belly. On the third day, the stain has almost vanished. It is just a slight discolouration. That night Frank caresses the space where the stain had been. By morning, it is gone.

The next day, Frank returns to the herbarium before work, when he knows it will be almost empty. He wants another orchid. He waits, but there is always someone near. He feels watched. He scans the room for cameras, but can see nothing. He is running very late. He approaches the orchids, reaches out for another, and hears a gentle cough. He turns to see one of the Garden's staff looking at him. She smiles and says, "Please don't pick the flowers". Frank's hand drops. He slumps and walks slowly to the Gallery.

That night on the way home he stops at every florist he passes. It is mid-February and they only have roses. Frank has never given someone a rose. He does not want to buy one now. The last florist is in a side street near his building. By the time Frank gets there, it is closed. Next to the florist is a tattoo parlour, Full Fathom Five burnt in pokerwork above the door. Frank does not want to go home without a flower. He lingers to look at the designs in the window— samplers of skulls in black and coloured inks, half-naked women, Celtic and tribal designs. He watches the woman behind the counter and marvels at her coloured arms, complex designs disappearing into her sleeves. He looks at her piercings—ears, nose, lip, eyebrow— wondering what makes someone adorn themselves this way. As he turns to go, he sees a sampler of flowers and in the centre his Arethusa. He stops and stares.

That night he stays up searching online for images of tattooed flowers. He sees collections of flowers on skin. Gardens seeded in limb and torso beds snake under clothing and body hair. He lies awake for hours stroking his own skin, touching the spot on his belly the orchid had stained. The next morning, a Saturday, he returns to Full Fathom Five and points to the orchid on the wall and his belly. Prue, the tattoo artist, warns him of the pain of tattooing along the waistline, but Frank is certain where he wants his first planting.

The pain of the tattoo shocks him. He feels his skin is earth under a harrow as the needles plant the orchid. Prue works silently. Concentrating. He imagines her working in a light, sandy soil fertilised with blood. Slowly, dreamily, Frank's gritted teeth relax, though gardening the pain does not stop. It stays with him as Prue finishes her work, covers the tattoo with plastic wrap and tapes it down. He only half listens to her instructions on caring for the tattoo as he pulls up his pants and tightens his belt. It aches all the way home. For the next few days, he has to abandon belts for suspenders.

From that one orchid, Frank's garden grows. Pay cheques and pain order each season's planting. He and Prue plant protea among heather, a cosmos once extinct is preserved in shallow skin. Frank plants for years. He forgets about his apartment and its light and heating. He plants and throws out his pots and potting mix. He plants until his beds overflow. Colour curls behind his ears and over the hills of his buttocks—ghost orchids grow in the secret spaces between his toes.

He tracks his plantings in a new spreadsheet. Species name, common name, origin, location in his garden. He names the scents of flowers, the pain in planting, the cost, healing time and infections. At night, while completing his spreadsheet, he caresses his garden. He runs his fingers over the flowers and through the branches of trees.

One day Frank panics. He wants an avenue of trees in his garden, but his beds are almost full. Prue calms him with a lecture on perspective. Soon vast oaks track the inside of his thighs, receding to a vanishing point in his crotch.

Later that year, the garden is complete. His job is to tend it. He sees Prue less often, but still visits when she wants to display her work. He likes to show off his garden—the archivist as exhibit. Every day he works special creams and unguents into his skin. But

no matter how he cares for it, time stretches the garden, flowers sag and droop—patches became overgrown with grey hair. He weeds assiduously with wax.

A year later, he discovers a cancer has poisoned the soil beneath his careful planting. Metastasising cells make the flowers look sickly as their ground takes on a sallow glow. Resisting this last season, Frank makes plans to preserve his garden. He creates a final spreadsheet, a simple list. Instructions for his doctor and the specialists: the taxidermist, the frame maker, the lawyer who will handle his bequest. He plans to return his garden to the National Gallery— stretched, framed and ready for hanging. Prue will be pleased.