



Transitional Seasons

INCREASINGLY, I've been drawn away from the computer, where I'm trying to write for a living, and out to the garden. On this October morning, sun glitters off rain-soaked trees and grass; the tall fronds of wild asparagus blow like smoke against a wall of spruce. I wander around the garden, stopping to snip faded blooms off the chrysanthemums. A one-legged titmouse lands at a nearby feeder. Walking on, I pick a leaf off the lemon verbena and crush it between my fingers, greedy for the sharp citrus-tangy smell before a hard frost blackens the leaves. Back in the house the computer idles. I'm just taking a short break, I say, but before I know it, I'm changing the shape of a bed, hauling in compost to build it up, moving some plants that are struggling in a shadier, damper spot, digging a path through the middle and filling it in with wood chips. The project takes all day, particularly since I pause frequently, drifting off into reverie.

Realizing that another day has passed without any writing work happening, I sternly tell myself that I need a plan. This is a familiar injunction, applied to every aspect of my life. In the spring, armed with graph paper and colored pencils, I tried to impose a design on the garden. I even made a list of plants to buy, which I whittled down to fit my budget. But I lost the list. Without a plan, serendipitous things happened. The catmint grew five feet tall and wide, gloriously claiming a space in the back of the border, framed by two delphiniums, palest lavender and electric blue, and a mass of brilliant yellow ozark sundrops. Morning glories, planted late and carelessly, bloomed profusely, twining high through the branches of a dying Washington hawthorn. A volunteer tomato plant bore fruit.

This is what life's all about in my middle years: balancing my need to draw the future in neatly shaded blocks on graph paper with the knowledge that ultimately I relinquish control. In my pottery class, the teacher asks what I want to work on. A set of pasta bowls I say, imagining kitchen cabinets eventually filled with well crafted handmade ware. But the clay takes over, teaching me about the delicate touch of pulling a pot up, working the walls to just the right thinness, sometimes pushing too far, to the point of collapse. When I view the slightly off-center result the perfectionist in me purses her lips and tsk, "Well, you'll do better next

time," but a freer me values the form that grew from my fingertips, the heft of it, the curve as it rests in my hands, commenting on usefulness and recognizing the potential for grace.

Pine needles drift over the last of the flowers. The leaves on the sugar maple begin to fall, exposing birds' nests high in the branches. I think back to a morning in April, when the migratory birds arrived. I was sitting on my porch, trying to work on a short story, but I couldn't concentrate. Every time I turned my eye inward to contemplate the shadowy characters creeping around my imagination, something with bright plumage darted by and I was lost, following it to its perch high up in the maple, partly hidden by new foliage.

I gave up the illusion of writing and sat in the garden. The redstarts darted and swooped, a pair of tanagers flew by, so close to me I felt the slight breeze they stirred; a hummingbird buzzed my red-shirted shoulder. My eyes flicked around trying to catch glimpses of brilliance. It felt difficult to return to the computer then, but I did, if only to record the experience of sitting with all that vibrant life winging around me. I felt blessed in some way and humbled, although those words seem too intense somehow, too grand for what was a small experience, one morning, that's all, in which I chose to be in the pulsing present moment. In the end, that's all there is. I throw a hunk of clay on the wheel and slowly move it toward center. I rest my hands on the keyboard and write about what I'm living.

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