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Ousden Hall Gardens: Vestigium

HELEN HILLS

IT WAS UNBOUNDED. Yet multiply contained.

The stable block was deserted, apart from one flat on the ground floor where a light sometimes shone dimly. We were supposed to keep away. But you could climb up a ladder and crawl through collapsed doorways into an enfilade of small rooms above the stables, partially blocked by collapsed timbers, abandoned suitcases, and drifts of sheet music. Music for piano, violoncello, and violin, operas, music hall, cabarets, and French cafés littered more or less empty rooms. It thrilled me with its mystery and sultry sophistication. I couldn't read the music, but the pages were beautiful to look at, so I knew the music must be, too. And the extension and splitting of words—sometimes a single word was stretched across several lines—was enough for me to see that here sense came from somewhere other than the usual direction of words, not from beginning to end, but erupting and inhabiting them from halfway through [AU: We are having difficulty parsing this sentence. Can you refine?], in a thrilling and glamorous sabotage. I pored over it for hours, trying to work it out. It left me on the edge of something, unsettled, as if, if only I could decipher it, I would be able to save something or prevent something ominous, that, without it, I couldn't apprehend.

Beside the stable block a creaking clock tower, falling in on itself, straddled twin brick shafts that plunged into water-filled crevasses, barely covered by rotting boards, like a terrible secret. The weights of the clock mechanism plumbed as far underground as the tower rose above it. Its imminent collapse was held off by a few metal props and girders at unlikely angles. Once we climbed up, cramming toes into holes where bricks had crumbled and clutching at broken beams for support. My brothers made it to the top. I crouched on the first landing on slimy floorboards, shaking with fear. After that the clock tower



Ousden Hall, Suffolk (demolished 1954).

Photo courtesy of Lost Heritage (www.lostheritage.org.uk).

always held itself in rebuke to me. It had witnessed my cowardice, and I feared its revenge. What else were those shafts left exposed for?

My grandparents lived in the kitchen block of the old Victorian mansion, the rest long demolished. Along with curiously shaped and proportioned rooms, no indoor bathroom, and only an AGA and fireplaces to heat the place, they inherited a magnificent walled garden—the erstwhile kitchen garden, completely enclosed by tall brick walls, studded at intervals with peeling doors, and equipped with an array of greenhouses, splendid with engineered ventilation and heating systems, such that, by cranking a wheel, all the windows opened at once, like ailerons on an airplane, purposeful and meaningful and, given the distinctly unkempt and disorderly nature of the place, strangely systematic. Most of the greenhouses were filled with tomatoes and chrysanthemums grown by my grandfather, but my grandmother's greenhouse was special, elegant with a beauty that ran from its lovely wooden white frame, swollen at the center, with a raised glass cupola

to permit the growing of luxuriant palms, to the cranks and shafts for ventilation and pipes for heating, and a subterranean cistern that ran beneath the staging for irrigation and adornment, where dark weed, coral water lilies, and goldfish dwelled. The delicious smell of heat, of heat on dust and rich earth. There grew vast cacti of which my grandmother was particularly proud, hundreds of years old, their upper stories swathed in cobwebs. Their spires burst intermittently into scattered primrose yellow flowers. There too was a low-growing plant that closed its dainty fanlike leaves on touch, shriveled and deluded. The smell of tomatoes was everywhere then—that pale silver scent which bursts deep green in touch radiant like a kiss [AU: We do not quite follow this descriptive phrase. May we end sentence after “then.”?] The precise and deft removal of side shoots—this action today a ritual I perform with her in mind. She could make anything grow. And there were always flowers of improbable size and color, vast clouds of pink and yellow and white trumpets tumbling and seedlings ranged in neat patient rows waiting. Everything attuned and at ease.

Her humming was legendary. Born out of one note, it emerged like a plant unfurling at speed, wove and leapt and moved around it, in tune not with any known melody or song, but with the rhythm of her horticultural mood, an alchemical combination that could not be deciphered, because it was not a representation but a manifestation, an occupation, a sound that was as much a part of the greenhouse and its plants as the light that was also intensified there, brilliant and dazzling. Her greenhouse. To approach the greenhouse in search of her and to hear her humming was to be in a state of grace.

The deep orange gloating of huge goldfish in the goldfish pond. Four sets of curved steps, herringboned brick, led steeply down to a sunken octagonal pond, around which were terracotta-edged rose beds and formal redbrick piers. Largely overgrown by brambles and elderflower bushes, it was as [elegant and beautiful as a dream [AU: is this the best phrase?]] .

Most haunting of all were the lost tennis courts, marked by twisting paths, partly lost in moss, that led to sunken meadows edged by a ha-ha, which was, to me, like a hinge between dream and being, a

place where desires were exposed and yet creased in hiding for next time. The epitome of a particular melancholic longing that the past had bequeathed especially to me. To jump over the edge was to leap into a mirage or out of the dream. The tennis courts were barely decipherable, occupied by rifts of softest mosses and vetches and tiny flowers that my mother called “Little Bit of Bread and No Cheese,” like, she said, the song of the yellowhammers that thronged the brambles, as if connections between things depended in some opaque way on the meaning of color. Personally I knew the tennis courts to be the place of skylarks; it was that sort of place that required a higher perspective, and above the sunbaked, molehill-uneven grass, luminous above, skylarks were singing.

And all day long it [AU: vague referent--please clarify.] was running. Through a flint-arched gate another vast wild garden led downhill to the big pond—a boating lake with a boathouse, a mass of rotting timbers, and a drowning boat. To me evocative of boating parties and moonlit romance. But we were warned of its perils. It was bottomless. It knew no mercy. Under the water the mud went on forever. So if you were to fall in, you would drown in mud, which was far worse than to drown in water (though none of us could swim). It was the stuff of my childhood nightmares—falling through water—lashing out to catch hold of something, failing, flailing, upside down and nothing to hold onto, plunging through the murky film of water, seeing last year’s leaves and fish floating by and knowing that this was only the horrifying prelude to an even more horrifying thing still to come. I would wake up gasping, panicked, unable to breathe.

But only once did I run downstairs to seek solace. I was five years old.

“I am frightened of dying,” I told my mother. She looked out of the window for a long time. It was dark outside. There was nothing to see. The windowpanes held back the unfathomable dark and bounced back the light of the kitchen. She said, “But just imagine if life went on forever, with no end. That would be even worse.” The death I feared seemed to touch the unending present to which she referred in the reflection of the bulb in the glass that kept the night

out. One obliterated the other. I thought of the mud at the bottom of the pond that was worse even than drowning. Her words brought no consolation. Instead, something lurking out in the dark that tore at her got tangled up with my fear of death and added to the terror at the heart of things.

My grandparents' house had no heating system, but the greenhouses were lavishly supplied. Great cavernous underground hangars were heaped with coal and mountains of coke—and vast coke ovens, with rusty red cogwheels and valves, like steam engines. Eternal preternatural infernal-combustion intestines of pipes stealthily conducted steam underground into the greenhouses to pineapples and golden mimosas. There was no light in those grim cellars, and thus they were particularly filled with terror and exerted a compelling allure. One afternoon, equipped with a stuttering candle, I persuaded my younger brother to descend into one of the cellars as yet unexplored. Wide shallow steps, cloaked in moss, led down into a cavernous clanking sequence of underground rooms. We passed in terrified silence through several of them until, as I held up the candle, my eye was caught by a liquid glinting. Something green. We probed. A green jellified substance, inexplicably hidden and utterly terrifying. There had always been something disturbing about all that machinery underground. We fled, hearts pumping, back outside with our terrible secret. I was convinced it was napalm.

Three ancient flowering cherry trees, their limbs propped up on planks, like elderly ancestors on crutches. In spring their blossoms turned the sky pink and the air beneath their petticoats was thick with insects humming.

Espaliered apples and pears and cordoned plums, wearing little nameplates in lead, like bracelets dangling from their limbs, with their names incised in Latin. In spring the wild garden between the walled kitchen garden and the lake teemed with snowdrops, aconites, wood anemones, celandines, and later daffodils and narcissi—and then bluebells. You could pick armfuls of daffodils and no one would ever know where you'd been. Never such abundance again. Pheasant's-eye narcissi were my grandmother's favorite. They were tall and rarefied,

with a whiff of poaching (my grandfather possessed a gun, referred to occasionally in muffled tones), and a scent of lost worlds.

And when it was tea time, my grandmother, whom I loved even more than her magic kingdom, would come to the arched gate that linked the front garden to the wild garden leading to the big pond, and she would flap her apron like a sign, like a sail in a Greek myth, and call us with her own special sound, an ululation that meant pink iced buns, thick buttered bread, and tea, and which had no other or ulterior meaning.

I was already possessed by a passion for the lost past that was, it was clear to me even then, more present in its melancholy loss than it could ever have been in full throttle—the dream of the departed thing already haunted my childhood—so that when I traced the overgrown gravel paths down to the tennis courts, I was tracing paths where people dressed in tennis whites and carrying parasols had many times passed, and in their lost footsteps, the dream of their lost lives filled those paths with an exquisite possibility of abandon and loss redeemed, which even then I knew was as much my own as theirs. Or, rather, it was in the crossing or overlapping of our paths, the tracing of theirs with my own, that brought us into a pact—a most serious and thrilling and unspeakable pact—almost, but not quite, a promise to come of what might have been.