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To Fly an Earthen Carpet

By Mary Kay

I was born in the Chiltern Hills forty miles north of London, chalky escarpments with pockets of clay and flint, covered in woodlands of oak, beech, ash and cherry, pasture interspersed with common land of bracken and brambles. My home town lies in a deep valley through which the Flying Scotsman ran by the side of the Grand Union Canal. It was a small market town steeped in history, for there in 1066 William the Conqueror built a flint castle which in subsequent years lords and farmers pillaged in order to build their houses and barns, and nearby Mary Tudor was kept prisoner by Queen Elizabeth the First. Hundreds of years later my parents bought half an acre of land high on the steep, south facing valley side, and on it in the early 50's built a very ugly house, plain and square. They had very little money after the war, and a huge longing. It was with this longing that they compensated for the house by building an exceptionally beautiful garden.

For eighteen years this garden worked on my being. As a child, my whole sensibility centered around the garden. I saw my parents working there, weeding, burning, watering, planting, pruning, turning the compost, feeding the chickens, cutting hedges and lawns, picking flowers and dividing plants, digging them up and relocating them. Here we ate, talked, worked, argued and dreamt. Most important for me, I think, were the hours and hours of solitude. I was the youngest of three children with many years between us, so by the time I was born my parents were in their 40s and I was pretty much left to "get on with it." For me, "it" was complete and undisturbed absorption in the garden.

Lying in the dry grass listening to the aggravated flies, watching elusive grasshoppers, smelling the wafts of decomposing grass that mulched the raspberries, walking the shady damp hedged paths, hearing the faint sounds of activity at the top of the garden - being away, removed from all that, with the lawns, hedges, orchard and vegetable garden between myself and them. I travelled extensively within the garden limits, physically, visually, viscerally, sensually, and imaginatively.

I was never really interested in growing a garden as a child. I hadn't the will or stamina needed to dig and sow and weed. But I still have lists of names of plants in my head, and I realize so much conversation was about ceanothus, garrya elliptica, wisteria, jasmine, petunia, Jerusalem artichoke, stinking hellebore, purple sprouting broccoli, anemone blanda, the ranunculus family; and the names of roses: Phyllis Hyde, Peace, and Madame Isaac Pereire. These words evoke spaces, meals, color, weather, smells, objects and people; these names are locators for places and events. As I write and let the names course through my mind, I can feel a wave of sensations. My parent's garden offered a complete world, they seemed their happiest, least selfconscious when they were there. It was their place of reverie and so it became mine, a passed-on way of being.

When I left home and went to art school I had not learnt to recognize, let alone value this thing which was so much a part of me. For the next twelve years I painted things that were outside of my immediate experience; the circus, the city and the outdoor markets. I filled my canvases with people leading lives that I longed to know, that I observed vicariously and wished to understand. I had a strange fascination with the lives that were beyond the edges of my experience. During all this time I owned a small garden flat in London. I gardened the tiny pocket handkerchief plot as a matter of course, with a thoughtless intensity, effortlessly.

1984 was a time of abrupt and intense change for me, and I left my strip of garden. For the next five years my painting changed rapidly. The figures abruptly left the paintings - the subjects to which I had attached my emotions seemed no longer possible. I turned to the landscape of two London Parks, a small pond and shoreline of Suffolk. To all of these I became passionately and obsessively attached, to the extent that I think somehow I felt I owned them. I painted in watercolor from these places, and came back to the studio to paint canvases that overwhelmed me in scale and problems. This was the first time that I wanted to be

swallowed up by the sensations of the place, where I wanted, despite the enormous scale, a sense of intimacy. I now see that I was searching through the images and the paint for a very specific landscape, a sense of place.

In 1987 I came to the United States to graduate school. Here I felt the most disconnected from myself, and from my subject matter. The naivete with which I came to the States is painful to recall. I had not yet understood how essentially I was connected to the places in England that I had been painting, and I had not taken into allowance that it was going to be nearly impossible to slip into an intimate relationship with a place, landscape and culture that I had no attachments to, or understanding of. This landscape was both vast, abused, overwhelming, and actually in New Haven very dangerous - no more sitting alone in the countryside painting. I only had a bike. So I felt angry, what to do, where to stay? I flailed around a lot, and made a host of lousy paintings.

Then after taking a class which required that I take particular notice of my dreams, I found myself bringing together recalled memories of the garden of my childhood, of specific configurations of that landscape, and I began to paint. Once I had made these paintings I started to notice the flowers around me, especially the particularly sensuous ones, the peonies, the magnolias; and then also the insects that were in a profusion that I had never experienced before. Now I found that my place of connection was within immediate spaces, inside, around and across the surfaces of flowers and insects. These paintings were far more nearly like my earliest recollections of my parents' garden, where I encountered flowers and insects at eye level down in and amongst them, immersed in the sensations of being tiny and seeing the intimate and overtly sensual world closer, immediately, and often when very little, for the first time.

When I arrived with a friend in Kansas in August 1989 to take up a job teaching, we found ourselves in a ravaged, desiccated and seemingly inhospitable place, parched by drought. We set about finding somewhere to live, renting a place on the railroad tracks with a triangle of brown yard containing a half-dead lilac bush, a cedar, a redbud, and an inordinate number of rabbits. The following March in desperation I rototilled two huge rectangular plots of land and set about fighting Bermuda grass, determined that if I couldn't have England, I would make it here in my yard - again wrong and naive, to say the least. We had terrible water pressure: the plumber said it looked like most people's idea of a leaking faucet. For three years I grew too large a garden for the water capacity and for my ideas of how to garden.

It took me a long time to learn what, how and when I could plant. A flower garden was my foremost desire I was not interested in growing plants to eat. I had an overwhelming desire to make something beautiful, to create a refuge, a place of reverie.

One aspect of the whole project that was the most unexpected was how difficult it was. It was an incredible ordeal: especially the relationship of my body to the heat. It took me at least a year to truly understand when to work in the garden. I don't think I have ever been so aware of my body as I have been in this climate. The almost total lack of control that I had in the garden was frustrating, and gave me a sense of humility. Seed beds were washed away in an hour, cracked dry hard-packed earth was impenetrable, hot scorching winds parched plants, and most of the species of flowers that I wanted to grow totally refused to even raise their tender heads above the ground. Then came the relentless Bermuda grass, and then, the grasshoppers.

Building the garden began as a psychological necessity; I simply could not have stayed here if I hadn't done it. It was a survival technique - I had no intention of painting it. Instead, I struggled hopelessly for a year to paint the Kansas landscape. Eventually, I collected insects from my garden and in exasperation and frustration I painted them, using them as vehicles for my expression of the human condition: violent, wasted, earth-bound, yet unbelievably beautiful and incomprehensible. I was caught by intense observation of them and the potential narrative they offered. Meanwhile I was building a more successful garden, constantly being torn between time in the garden and time in the studio needing and wanting both equally.

I had been growing cockscomb flowers, haunting, vulgar as my mother would have said, sensuous beyond belief and totally extraordinary. I found myself involved again with the convolutions of the world inside the flowers. I was hooked. I started to paint outside in the yard.

When I paint directly from the garden I'm simply battling to hold on. Usually it's pretty hellish out there. Its far too hot to think and it becomes exhausting, small changes take on mammoth proportions. Turpentine evaporating up my nose, flies and mosquitoes constantly hungry, and a small mean area of shade under the umbrella, demanding that I constantly change the position of the table, easel, painting, paint brushes, myself, the umbrella, the ropes and rocks. Fighting with a Kansas wind that is always grabbing at the umbrella and when successful takes everything with it landing crushingly in the middle of the flower garden, creating havoc.

But it's so damned beautiful, incomprehensible, so complicated that I can hardly get close to expressing the sensations I feel and see. I am moved by the cumulative experience of seeing the garden pass from its slow struggle with winter, the rush of the lush beginnings, to its frenzied full blossoming and its growing fragility and poignant decline. Everything happens too fast to grasp and to be able to hold. That's why I stand there, just trying to see and to get a glimpse of understanding, to hold a fragment of it, before it changes, passes and is lost. Trying to find that place I know I had as a child of truly seeing, being totally absorbed, left alone and experiencing an un-nameable extended time: an epiphany, being taken in, absorbed, held inside it, a place of exhilaration, transcending. That is when the earthen carpet flies.