



Kathy's Garden: Coping with the November Garden

Gardening is a peculiar combination of extravagant hopefulness & prosaic mucking about with shovels & mixtures of things that would suit the alchemists or MacBeth's three witches. Never is this paradoxical blend of passion & bat guano quite so evident as in November. It may not yet have rained enough to refresh the last pallid roses or moisten the new seedbeds; the brilliant turn of the leaves may not quite have climaxed, but there is the gardener, eyes focused somewhere towards spring, spreading compost, hacking old raspberry canes, inwardly counting over the past year's glories & griefs, certain that the next year will bring only glory.

Sometimes in November I look at the gardens with focused eyes & momentary shock. Heavens—the beautiful musk roses stopped blooming months ago, didn't they? Everything is dry & faded, save the brave & brilliant leaves of the persimmon tree. The lilies, sprawled this way & that, are dying down in sad yellow tatters. The deer have eaten the pretty heart shaped leaves of all the violets. The turkeys have nibbled the primroses. The dogs have lain comfortably in the lavender, and something with very large teeth has nibbled the fish emulsion container & sprawled in the raspberries. We saw a bear & her cub the other night on the long dirt road...

Perhaps I should take up tole painting instead.

Except, in November, the garden is in the mysterious new beginnings. Roots are stirring. There is still time to plant bulbs, to divide clumps of overgrown perennials, to take cuttings and to beg for starts & cuttings from friends. Be bold as you plant and

generous as you give away. I have had great success just breaking off likely bits of plants & sticking them into the ground (remember to water your plants in the making if the rains haven't begun); if you are of a chemical & scientific frame of mind you can use rooting powders available at your local nursery.

Hydrangeas, roses, buddleia, lavender, sage, rock roses, mock orange, penstemons & fuchsias are all fairly eager to grow from cuttings six to ten inches long. Actually, I don't measure—but don't those numbers add an air of authority? *Geraniums* are also very easy but frost tender, though the rose scented sort survives well to about 20 degrees; you may wish to make cuttings for sunny windows now.

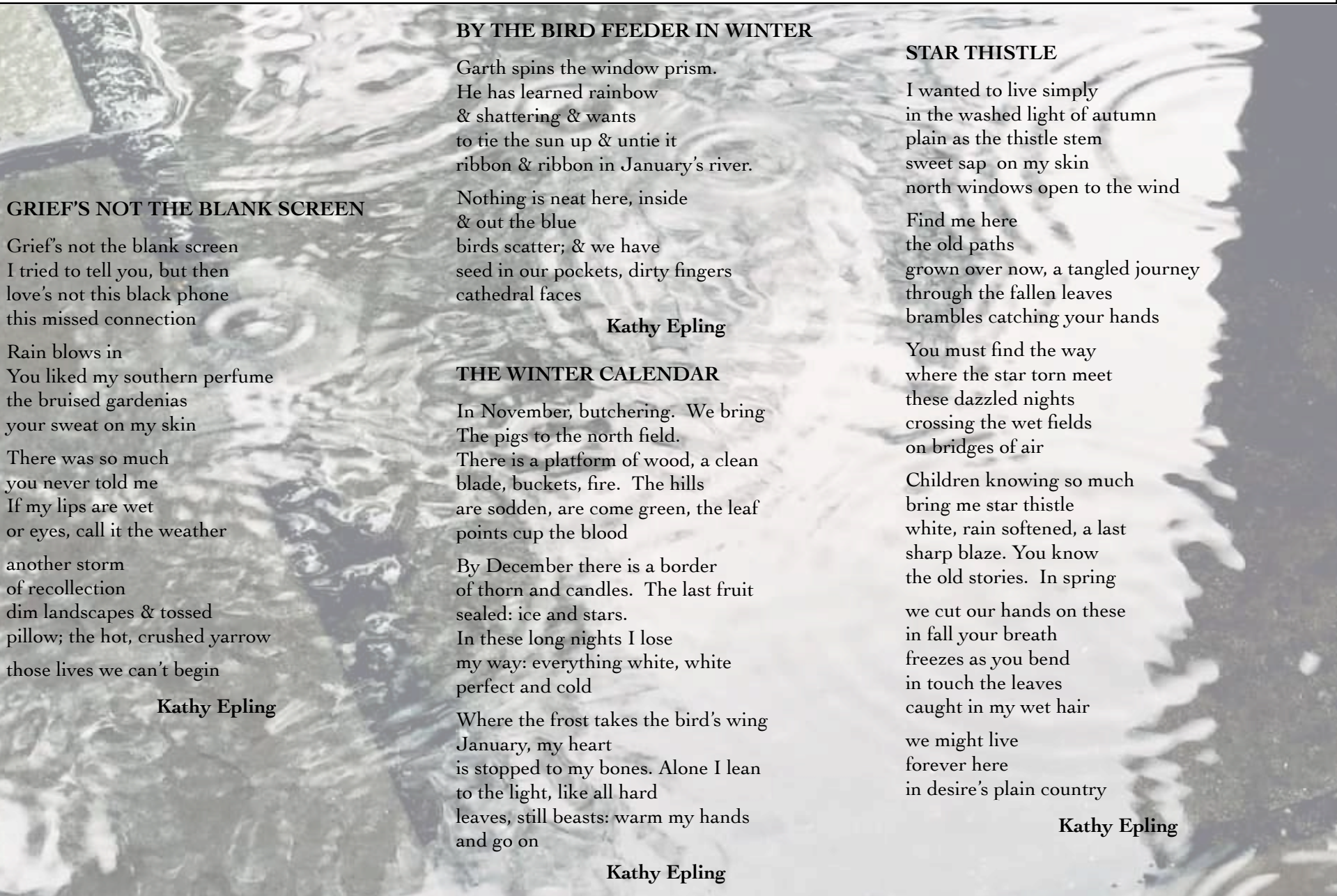
In a month or so the glossy seed catalogs will start piling up again, making us eager to grow rare & beautiful things in every corner we can find; making us sure we can grow anything with ease.

Meanwhile, to give our eyes a few flowers to focus upon in the autumn garden we could put in starts of hardy annuals—a patch of *primulas* or a burst of velvety little *pansies*. I always wish, about now, that I had the foresight to plant autumn *crocuses* & *sternbergia* a few months ago. The silky lilac flowers of the saffron *crocus* would be so welcome now; the bright yellow the *sternbergia* is a sort of foretaste of the *daffodils*. Next year.

Meanwhile for the desperate there are potted chrysanthemums with their bitter sweet scent, the lovely white roots of hyacinths already faithfully filling their jars of water, & the prospect of buds on the old Christmas *cactus*.

It will be June again before we know it.

Kathy Epling



GRIEF'S NOT THE BLANK SCREEN

Grief's not the blank screen
I tried to tell you, but then
love's not this black phone
this missed connection

Rain blows in
You liked my southern perfume
the bruised gardenias
your sweat on my skin

There was so much
you never told me
If my lips are wet
or eyes, call it the weather

another storm
of recollection
dim landscapes & tossed
pillow; the hot, crushed yarrow
those lives we can't begin

Kathy Epling

BY THE BIRD FEEDER IN WINTER

Garth spins the window prism.
He has learned rainbow
& shattering & wants
to tie the sun up & untie it
ribbon & ribbon in January's river.

Nothing is neat here, inside
& out the blue
birds scatter; & we have
seed in our pockets, dirty fingers
cathedral faces

Kathy Epling

THE WINTER CALENDAR

In November, butchering. We bring
The pigs to the north field.
There is a platform of wood, a clean
blade, buckets, fire. The hills
are sodden, are come green, the leaf
points cup the blood

By December there is a border
of thorn and candles. The last fruit
sealed: ice and stars.
In these long nights I lose
my way: everything white, white
perfect and cold

Where the frost takes the bird's wing
January, my heart
is stopped to my bones. Alone I lean
to the light, like all hard
leaves, still beasts: warm my hands
and go on

Kathy Epling

STAR THISTLE

I wanted to live simply
in the washed light of autumn
plain as the thistle stem
sweet sap on my skin
north windows open to the wind

Find me here
the old paths
grown over now, a tangled journey
through the fallen leaves
brambles catching your hands

You must find the way
where the star torn meet
these dazzled nights
crossing the wet fields
on bridges of air

Children knowing so much
bring me star thistle
white, rain softened, a last
sharp blaze. You know
the old stories. In spring

we cut our hands on these
in fall your breath
freezes as you bend
in touch the leaves
caught in my wet hair

we might live
forever here
in desire's plain country

Kathy Epling

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