



# KATHY'S GARDEN: Wild Angels in Concrete

Often I get the pleasure of talking with people who know much more than I do about some interesting aspect of this green world. When I do ask eager questions I receive sometimes astounding answers. There was the

professional termite inspector who regaled me with stories of the social life of termites. For weeks I believed his straight-faced assurance that down south, perhaps near Los Angeles, there were concrete devouring termites. I began considering how interesting it would be to design gardens in crumbling old condos. My glee at the thought was a little scary. Then I met, first a blank look, then gales of laughter, from a young man out to exterminate the wood eating sort of termite. I realized, alas, my first informant was probably putting me on. To this day they probably laugh there in termite central, somewhere in Fortuna, about the gullible, guileless woman who believed in concrete eating critters.

Most of my friends with specialized knowledge are, fortunately for me, less given to flights of fancy. A couple weeks ago I got to talking with a botanist friend after we left a worthy community board meeting. He had just been on a botanizing drive out past Alderpoint & had come across what he supposed was the "sunflower" used in traditional Native American cures.

As he described it, I recognized it as a *wyethia* I once encountered on a slope near the South Fork of the Eel—splendid orange yellow flowers like huge daises surrounded by long rough leaves. "Donkey ears" came unsummoned to my mind. My friend nodded; that is, indeed, one of the common names. What I didn't know about the *wyethia* was that the root holds a powerful, resinous fragrance that is also present in the stems & leaves. My friend had a bit of leaf to show me.

I learned from him about other plants he'd seen used in ceremonies & curing; a world of knowledge I could barely glimpse, growing in the greater gardens that stretch unplanted and untended through our hills and valleys.

I do love my tame, planned, & planted gardens. But I am always glad for word from the wild gardens that surround us, always pleased to learn a little more about some wildflower or supposed weed. It's like getting to know a friend better.

Some plants, like some people, rush up to you in extravagant forcefulness. "Hi! Here I am! All of me!" Others are more subtle. They take a while to know & understand. After years they can still surprise you. A lot of my favorites are like that.

One of the plants we talked of was *angelica*, of which, my friend said, there are four native sorts around here. I've seen & enjoyed the kind that grows along the coast by Ferndale & Centerville. It has no apparent scent but great skyrockets of white flowers & huge stalks holding

tropical leaves. My friend tells me the inland species have highly fragrant roots & figure in much tribal lore & legend. It is a magical plant with a long history in Europe as well. Garden *angelica*, *angelica archangelica*, was supposed to cure just about everything from broken hearts to Black Death. My friend said his daughter found a plant on a rack at a local Payless....! It is a good time to plant *angelica* in your garden, as well as other biennials, magic or not. These plants, which grow one year & flower the next, will bloom next spring if you set out plants or start seed between now & late September. *Hollyhocks*, *foxgloves*, beautiful clove scented *sweet williams*, & *canterbury bells* can all be set out now, providing you can keep them watered. You might also start considering what plants you have coveted all year as you gazed at them growing in your friends' gardens. Prepare your polite but heartbreaking requests for cuttings & divisions in time for the great second spring of the year – planting before the rains of autumn. Yes, I know it seems far away, but before you know it the seasons will turn round again. The wise gardener thinks ahead.

Meanwhile, are your annuals looking heat battered & tawdry? Sheer them back & water them well & they should reward you with flowers in abundance for many weeks to come. Perhaps there aren't really concrete eating bugs—but I promise you there are seasons of delight still to come.

Kathy Epling

## Lot's wife

crow winter when she left  
the city a contagion of sorrows  
we saw her, that rope of pearls  
or tears at her throat  
walking slowly, having forgot  
her name with the lilacs of that garden  
where (so she cried) peacocks & swans were  
blazing now, now ashes by the fountains

was it this, she asked, dust  
skeleton voices, stone catalogues  
travelers calling themselves  
angels, stiff, impossible, leading her on  
this that was meant  
for the story's end

when we last saw her, turned,  
the windows of her city burning white  
against that wet salt face  
we stopped ours, like breath

Kathy Epling

## July

slack mouthed, drunk as fish  
out of water, we  
billow in the heat, the bed  
sogged with sweat, the  
cat gaping at her side  
the mercury beyond all toleration. Last  
night I dreamt lepers  
wading the Pacific, your  
lips blistering my skin  
your hands heavy  
& empty

my hollow ballast –  
all the air burning

Kathy Epling

## Astronomer

in pain's dark nebula you see  
your own blurred dead, these  
suicides, drift calm as moons  
their faces toward you  
dim processions, all the burials  
you say are less than wheels of stars  
though their centers blaze  
a private galaxy

& griefs crouch known  
behind your teeth, sweet nor acid;  
resident  
they mean no more

clumsy with love we have called;  
still you turn aside, smoothing your lens  
till the stars draw down, or ghosts  
bright as tears burn out the sky

Kathy Epling

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- Lt. Ehren Watada,  
Veterans for Peace 2006 National Convention

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