

Zen Bow Article: The Bodhisattvic Garden

(After the zendo, the Zen Center's back garden is an ideal place for contemplation. It remains a still point in the middle of an inner-city neighborhood, and when I need to begin a letter, or to make some notes on the changing seasons, I find myself drawn to its domain.)



Today, having nothing to write down, I leave my notebook open on one of the tables. As the pages flutter in a light breeze, the white paper with its thin blue lines absorbs the chattering of nearby sparrows, the scuttling of a squirrel as it spirals down a tree trunk, the flickering of someone walking briskly behind a fence. High up in the late afternoon sky, the vapor-trail of a plane, reflecting the earth, becomes more elongated and curved as it stretches towards the horizon.

The following evening, the neighbor's calico cat presses her nose against the screen door and stares across the kitchen foyer into the twilight of the zendo. Like a person admiring a painting by Vermeer, she studies the receding aisle of shadowy figures who are sitting in perfect stillness on their brown cushions. Then a bell is struck to end the round of meditation, and she disappears down the back steps, her own bell tinkling faintly as she runs across the lawn.

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The leaves are whispering to each other in a light and steady rain. Summer is now well-established, and the covering of myrtle under the locust tree is a deep shade of green. Beyond the myrtle, a dogwood is in full bloom, its white,

four-leafed flowers resembling clusters of child-like stars. Overhead, hidden by the foliage, a crow caws twice and then falls silent. The dry pebbles under the eaves of the covered walkway seem whiter than usual. And the rain continues, discreetly, accompanied by the rustling of sparrows.

The next day the rain is forgotten (winter itself being only a memory), and the whole garden radiates a steady and reassuring heat. For work, three people are stuffing cushions on the back deck. At one point a large clump of kapok is carried away by a gust of wind, only to be caught in the branches of a nearby fir tree. It stays there for a while before being dislodged by another gust of wind, which sends it rolling across the lawn. Sparrows, attentive to any change in the garden, soon surround the clump, plucking wisps from its white mass. A thick covering of clouds remains overhead. In the background, someone is hammering in nails; it's the time for repairing roofs, and for making nests.

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An early evening in mid-September. The seasons have begun to change, and I'm sitting on a bench in the back garden. The light is gently luminous. A warm breeze, descending through the branches of a maple tree, also rises up from the lawn. It's as though I've dipped my feet in the invisible waves of a departing summer, and I feel myself becoming lighter, even as the evening sky begins to shed its light.

A month later, after the first frost, crickets are still chirping beneath the earth. One afternoon, while sitting on the walkway, I study the progress of a solitary bee as it moves through the cold air, slowly and methodically exploring the lawn. From my vantage point, it's plain to see that all the flowers have gone, and that there's not a speck of white or yellow to be found among the blades of grass. Nevertheless, the bee continues its exploration. In doing so, it displays the same perseverance as a lone firefly who kept vigil in the garden one night in mid-summer. For half an hour, although no other light responded, I watched its green pulse flicker on and off as the firefly wove its way above the bushes and between the trees.

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During the night, the sparrows' water dish outside our window froze over, and today it's capped by a dome of white. In the back garden, the upper part of each tree branch - now completely leafless - is covered by a line of snow, so that it seems as if a shift in focus has occurred, or that a white tree has been superimposed over every dark one. For their part, each of the benches has its own mound of snow. They resemble a collection of small tombs; soft structure into which you can insert your hand and touch - not a piece of bone - but the finest lining of crystals.

For the Rohatsu sesshin, at the beginning of December, I'm the receptionist. During the day I work in the office, opening mail and answering telephone calls. This afternoon, mid-way through the sesshin, the temperature plummets, and snowflakes the size of white butterflies come down. When I go outside, the snow suddenly stops, the sky lightens, and dense flocks of crows begin flying overhead. I follow the crows into Arnold Park, where they're already roosting in every tree. By this time, part of the sky in the distance is pure blue, while overhead it remains a pearly gray. You can see how green the grass is - luminous and aquatic - beneath the fresh covering of snow, and how the windows of the houses along one side of the street are being transformed into sheets of burning gold by the setting sun. But most intoxicating of all are the voices of the crows in the trees: cawing, barking, yelping, screeching, giving little trills and peeps and whistles, croaking like bullfrogs, chattering like kookaburras, going off like car alarms, gurgling like old drainpipes . . . and whispering darkly as if night has just fallen. Mixed in with this, you can also hear the *Heart Sutra* being chanted by fifty people from inside the zendo:

Form is only emptiness, emptiness only form.

As I stand by the gate, about to enter the silence of the back garden, a crow flies past with snow on its beak. "The garden hears the cries of the world," I will later write in my notebook. "It provides a setting, a locus, where all things can rest and be resolved."

-Richard von Sturmer

Richard is a writer, occasional photographer, and former co-editor of *Zen Bow*.