

Brigid Collins: Artist in Residence at Dr. Neil's Garden

May 2021 – June 2022

The grasses with their solstice seed-heads shiver in the light's gaze. On the city hills, in parks and gap-sites, in every siding and pavement-crack the grasses flower, and ribwort plantain, poor old fechter, dreams its silly dreams. When they tremble, it's as though each knows its own species of bliss. Our time is now, they insist, our brief brave bid for futurity.

Let's climb the hillside and lie down, and imagine we're already in our graves. If there's a breeze, we'll watch the stems nodding over us, seeds purplish against the sky. Let's do this to know we can: grasses will be part of our forgetting. To live, we need to remember how to die.

- Kathleen Jamie



"The grasses will be part of our forgetting..." Watercolour on mono-printed tissue paper

This prose poem by **Kathleen Jamie** holds an important truth for me, as it will also do for many others. Spending amongst plants, being held by their greenness and their growth but, also, by their fading and their shedding of what they have been in their prime, keeps us connected with what it is to be alive, with the ever-present knowledge that what we are is short-lived, fragile, incredibly beautiful and painful, all at once. Somehow, being around plants, helps us to remember all of this and yet be able to forget the pain that comes with it and is an inevitable part of our experience. Dr. Neil's is a special, lovingly created and tended garden, where you will often find me during this, my year as **Artist in Residence**. It is a place where the veil, formed between us and our connection with the earth, becomes lifted from the moment that you step through its gate. Here, we may find a space in which to remember *and* to forget...

Back in May, when days were still quite cool and we were very tentatively emerging from our own hibernation (in the form of lockdown), I began work by observing late-blooming Spring flowers such as *Primula veris*, primrose, or cowslip, the *Bainne bo bleachtain*, fondly remembered from my childhood in Ireland but now a rare species there. Remembering and forgetting at the same time, I made little studies of this flower as it appeared around the garden, experimenting with inks made from natural dyes and also with collage and hugely enjoying noticing how daisies and grasses were growing in and around the base of their tall stems, poking out from between the leaves. By 'dropping down' to their level, I could begin to understand them more, much like getting to know someone well...



We are daisies of the common sward..., from *Daisies* by Kathleen Jamie. Studies of primroses, daisies and grasses (ink, watercolour, collage, pencil)

Irises – An Unfurling

The warmth and light of June days gave rise to more exotic blooms of Irises, each with their unique way of unfurling, much like our own. Richard Mabey, one of my favourite 'nature writers' and author of *Flora Britannica*, describes beautifully the way in which flowers share with us a uniqueness, coupled with a sameness: *"How complex, perhaps mathematically pre-set forms, unwrapping themselves over the course of hours or days, invariably appear(ed) as a recognisable type but, in individual blooms, as subtle variations on that model, customised by the fuzzy logic of growth."* (in *The Cabaret of Plants: Botany and the Imagination*, pg. 32). Reminiscent of how a poem reveals itself, line by line, image by image, this is also very much how Dr. Neil's Garden becomes revealed, as you walk through it. American poet, Stanley Kunitz, understands how the totality of a garden becomes formed in your

mind, as you move through it and you become the instrument that defines it, in much the same way as you have to create the wholeness of a poem in your mind, by means of a *process*, by spending time in its company...



Studies of Irises, some in dappled sunlight



*They are pretending
that they've been here forever
which is a lie because I know
they have been blown hither
by a singular light breeze
that knew we were in need
of their staunch, upright stalks,
their hopeful yellow,
their flags unfurling new life.*

- From *Iris* by Diana Hendry



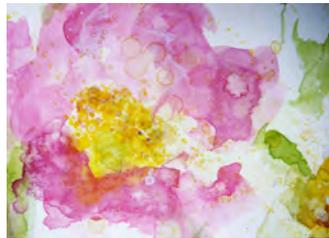
From a sketch poem by Christine De Luca:

*A little iris, late in the season,
still holds every hue:
through all the blues and greens
from mauve to violet;*

*colours from Caspian,
tints of the old Silk Road,
tongue to tip
a fine-veined tracery.*

Dog Roses – Just Enough

In June, the Dog Roses congregate alongside the paths and roads that criss-cross through and around Holyrood park, appearing to tumble over the walls and into Dr. Neil's Garden with a seeming abandon that is all their own. Although reminded by Robert Burns when he wrote (in *Tam O'Shanter*) "*You seize the flo'er, its bloom is shed*", how their short life resists attempts to either contain or to capture it, I nevertheless embarked on a number of studies of this tiny rose, nestling as it does, within an abundant yet barbed defence of greenery – being with it as its flowers blossomed, then faded, leaving a form of strange beauty in its wake – this brief life, somehow, just enough.

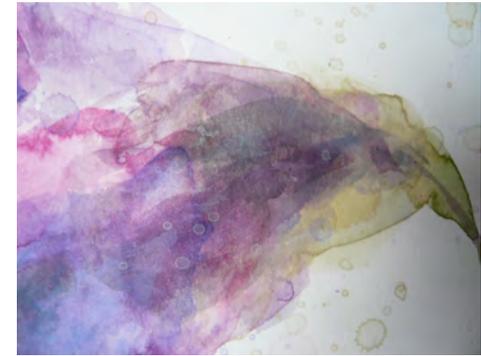
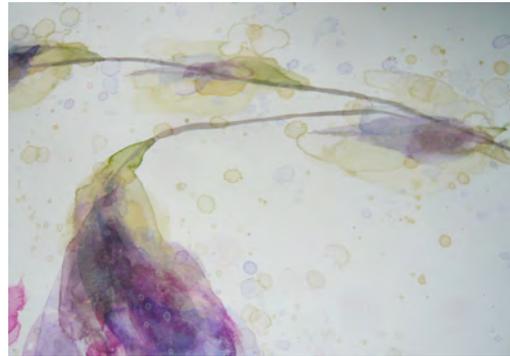
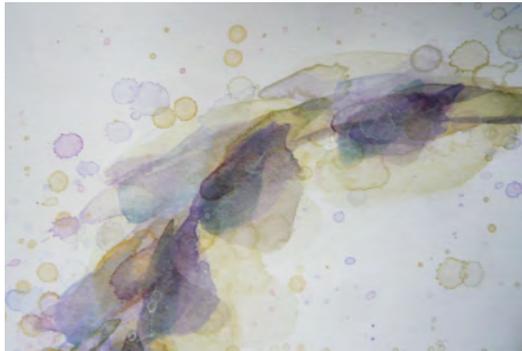
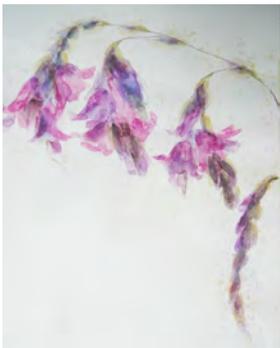


*Sufficient in size is the tiny wild rose
sufficient in staying power: a day
a transience. And the perfume
whose secret atoms break all bounds
all probabilities, conjures a presence.*

- From *Quantum Sufficit (A Sufficient Quantity)* by Christine De Luca

Flowering Grasses –A Comforting Cadence

My most recent studies, as my eyes have roved around the garden and landed - as do that of the bees that have been doing their thing around me, while I do mine – have been of flowering grasses, such as the magnificent *Dierama pulcherrimum*, also known as *Wand Flower*, or *Angel's Fishing Rods* (for obvious reasons!), wafting in the warm breeze, leaning into it with a cadence capable of lulling even the seemingly inconsolable state of mind.



Studies of flowering grasses, *Dierama pulcherrimum*

Work in Progress – A Looser Weave

Growing alongside the Dog Rose in the Physic Garden, I found a plant which I later learned to be Hedge Woundwort, or *Stachys sylvatica*, about which Herbalist Culpener wrote (in the 1600s) *“preserves the livers and bodies of men from the danger or epidemical diseases and, when you read on “and from witchcraft also”*. Observing these two, as if in conversation, I found myself being reminded of ‘sympathetic magic’ which, rather than some primitive stage on an upward journey towards real science, is a different way of understanding the world. Richard Mabey (in *Nature Cure*) relates how this way of approaching knowledge *“begins with observations and experiences, but then, instead of attempting to explain these by reducing them to ever smaller and more discreet parts or ‘atoms’, looks at them more broadly until they seem to fit into the weave of the world.”*



Dog Rose and Woundwort ‘in conversation’, encouraging a ‘looser weave’

The seed heads of *Grape Hyacinth*, or *Muscari armeniacum*, to give it's botanical label, which are super-abundant with tiny black seeds, rain down on me as I sit by them, mesmerised by the inherent tension held within a unique combination of delicacy and strength being expressed by their tiny, intricate forms. Here are early studies of these, the work emerging slowly, just as these seeds take a long time to mature and, like the best things, always worth waiting for...



Seed heads of *Grape Hyacinth*, *Muscari armeniacum* – very much a work in progress

Plans

As the magic of this place seeps into me and loosens the weave that I make, both with my hands and my mind, I will continue to make studies and immerse myself in the process that is the garden, conversing and exchanging with plants, with folk who work and walk here and with whom I take breaks and talk with about all manner of things. It all feeds into my work, to varying degrees and on different levels, as I develop artworks in different media and formats, also working in conjunction with poets Christine De Luca, Kathleen Jamie, Diana Hendry and others, whose words I will find ways of weaving into my work as my time in the garden

evolves through the seasons. I intend to hold a small number of workshops throughout the year, give talks about my work and become involved in other projects in and around the garden. It is also my wish that, down the line and should funding be forthcoming, a publication may be in the offing, since I see a book as a permanent exhibition for holding in your hands and becoming immersed in. I'm grateful to the Trustees of Dr. Neil's Garden for allowing me this wonderful opportunity and to Claudia, an inspirational gardener and artist.



The artist with a stem of Woundwort (photo by Christine De Luca)

Brigid Collins, Artist & Educator

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