Alice Walker

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

(1972)
their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as "the mule of the world." They dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls. They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned. Instead, men lit candles to celebrate the emptiness that remained, as people do who enter a beautiful but vacant space to resurrect a God.

Our mothers and grandmothers, some of them: moving to music not yet written. And they waited. They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead. Therefore to Toomer they walked, and even ran, in slow motion. For they were going nowhere immediate, and the future was not yet within their grasp. And men took our mothers and grandmothers, "but got no pleasure from it." So complex was their passion and their calm.

To Toomer, they lay vacant and fallow as autumn fields, with harvest time never in sight: and he saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment.

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear.

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. Did you have a genius of a great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasture?

lands? Or was her body broken and forced twice more than not sold away from her)—eight when her one joy was the thought of model stone or clay? How was the creativity of the black woman century after century, when for most of the America, it was a punishable crime for a black the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand it

Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what the agony of the lives of women who as Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack and others, and imagine those voices muzzled comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Saints.

The creation of the lives of women who in Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over with their real gifts stifled within them).

And, if this were the end of the story, we paraphrase of Okot P'Bitek's great poem:

O, my clanswomen
Let us all cry together!
Come,
Let us mourn the death
The death of a Queen
The ash that was produced
By a great fire!
O, this homestead is ut
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For our mother
The creator of the Stoo
And all the young won
Have perished in the w
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- generations of black women. How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and
century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in
America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And
the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist.
Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if
singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith,
Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among
others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to
comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers.
The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists,
Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died
with their real gifts stifled within them.
And, if this were the end of the story, we would have cause to cry out in my
paraphrase of Okot p'Bitek's great poem:

O, my clanswomen
Let us all cry together!
Come,
Let us mourn the death of our mother,
The death of a Queen
The ash that was produced
By a great fire!
O, this homestead is utterly dead
Close the gates
With lacari thorns,
For our mother
The creator of the Stool is lost!
And all the young women
Have perished in the wilderness!

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers
and grandmothers, ourselves—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we
ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond
efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black
American women are.
One example, perhaps the most pathetic, most misunderstood one, can provide a backdrop for our mothers' work: Phillis Wheatley, a slave in the 1700s.

Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One's Own,* wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself.

What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.

Virginia Woolf wrote further, speaking of course not of our Phillis, that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century," insert "black woman," insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert "Saint"], feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion"], that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty."

The key words, as they relate to Phillis, are "contrary instincts." For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley—as when we read the novels of Nella Larsen or the oddly false-sounding autobiography of that freest of all black women writers, Zora Hurston—evidence of "contrary instincts" is everywhere. Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind.

But how could this be otherwise? Captured at seven, a slave of wealthy, doting whites who instilled in her the "savagery" of the Africa they "rescued" her from, one wonders if she was even able to remember her homeland as she had known it, or as it really was.

Yet, because she did try to use her gift for poetry in a world that made her a slave, she was "so thwarted and hindered by . . . contrary instincts, that she . . . lost her health. . . ." In the last years of her brief life, burdened not only with the need to express her gift but also with a penniless, friendless "freedom" and several small children for whom she was forced to do strenuous work to feed, she lost her health, certainly. Suffering from malnutrition and neglect and who knows what mental agonies, Phillis Wheatley died.

So torn by "contrary instincts" was blad her description of "the Goddess"—as she p not have—is ironically, cruelly humorous. It is usu ridicule for more than a century. It is usu memory as that of a fool. She wrote:

> The Goddess comes, she moves Olive and laurel binds her gold Wherever shines this native of t Unnumber'd charms and recent

It is obvious that Phillis, the slave, co morning; prior, perhaps, to bringing in lunch. She took her imagery from the on others.

With the benefit of hindsight we ask, "I But at last, Phillis, we understand. No struggling, ambivalent lines are forced or not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly lit home and country and made a slave; a wo song that was your gift, although in a lanc your bewildered tongue. It is not so much alive, in so many of our ancestors, the not Black women are called, in the folklore th society, "the mule of the world," because that everyone else—everyone else—refuse "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean "Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." Whe ing, our character has been distorted; wh we have been handed empty inspiration farthest corner. When we have asked for In short, even our plainer gifts, our lab knocked down our throats. To be an art lowers our status in many respects, rath will be.

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So torn by "contrary instincts" was black, kidnapped, enslaved Phillis that
her description of "the Goddess"—as she poetically called the Liberty she did
not have—is ironically, cruelly humorous. And, in fact, has held Phillis up to
ridicule for more than a century. It is usually read prior to hanging Phillis's
memory as that of a fool. She wrote:

The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds her golden hair.
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise. [My italics]

It is obvious that Phillis, the slave, combed the "Goddess's" hair every
morning; prior, perhaps, to bringing in the milk, or fixing her mistress's
lunch. She took her imagery from the one thing she saw elevated above all
others.

With the benefit of hindsight we ask, "How could she?"

But at last, Phillis, we understand. No more snickering when your stiff,
struggling, ambivalent lines are forced on us. We know now that you were
not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly little black girl, snatched from your
home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing the
song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for
your bewildered tongue. It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept
alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song.

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in
society, "the mule of the world," because we have been handed the burdens
that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry. We have also been called
"Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention
"Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understand-
ing, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring,
we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the
farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children.
In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been
knocked down our throats. To be an artist and a black woman, even today,
lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it and yet, artists we
will be.

Therefore we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify
with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not
allowed to know: I stress some of them because it is well known that the
majority of our great-grandmothers knew, even without "knowing" it, the reality of their spirituality, even if they didn't recognize it beyond what happened in the singing at church—and they never had any intention of giving it up.

How they did it—those millions of black women who were not Phillis Wheatley, or Lucy Terry or Frances Harper or Zora Hurston or Nella Larsen or Bessie Smith; or Elizabeth Catlett, or Katherine Dunham, either—brings me to the title of this essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which is a personal account that is yet shared, in its theme and its meaning, by all of us. I found, while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative black woman, that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close.

In the late 1920s my mother ran away from home to marry my father. Marriage, if not running away, was expected of seventeen-year-old girls. By the time she was twenty, she had two children and was pregnant with a third. Five children later, I was born. And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school.

She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds. During the "working" day, she labored beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.

But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit?

The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked low—and low.
ers knew, even without “knowing” it, that if they didn’t recognize it beyond what it was, they never had any intention of s of black women who were not Phillis, Harper or Zora Hurston or Nella Larsen, or Katherine Dunham, either—brings arch of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” which is a, in its theme and its meaning, by all of us. e far-reaching world of the creative black ver to a question that really matters can be away from home to marry my father. Mar­ scepted of seventeen-year-old girls. By the children and was pregnant with a third. ud this is how I came to know my mother: ed woman who was rarely impatient in our was on view only a few times a year, when who had the misfortune to suggest to her school. ’e, even my brothers’ overalls. She made all the summers canning vegetables evenings making quilts enough to cover all labored beside—not behind—my father in unup, and did not end until late at night. r to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her he free from interruption—by work or the pm. And yet, it is to my mother—and all our that I went in search of the secret of what dated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the ut pops out in wild and unlikely places to overworked mother have time to know or it? ny of us have spent years discovering it. We should have looked high—and low.

For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by “an anonymous black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.”

If we could locate this “anonymous” black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers—an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.

As Virginia Woolf wrote further, in A Room of One’s Own:

Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have ex­
isted among the working class. [Change this to “slaves” and “the wives and daughters of sharecroppers.”] Now and again an Emily Bronte or a Robert Burns [change this to “a Zora Hurston or a Richard Wright”] blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils [or “Sainthood”], of a wise woman selling herbs [our root workers], or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen. . . . Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. . . .

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read. And so it is, certainly, with my own mother. Unlike “Ma” Rainey’s songs, which retained their creator’s name even while blasting forth from Bessie Smith’s mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother’s name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. It is probably for this reason that so much of what I have written is about characters whose counterparts in real life are so much older than I am.
But the telling of these stories, which came from my mother's lips as naturally as breathing, was not the only way my mother showed herself as an artist. For stories, too, were subject to being distracted, to dying without conclusion. Dinners must be started, and cotton must be gathered before the big rains. The artist that was and is my mother showed itself to me only after many years. This is what I finally noticed:

Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on.

And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art.

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.

Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them.

For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time.

This poem is not enough, but it is something, for the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers:

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty, search of my mother's garden, I found my way. And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, perhaps she painted vivid and dashing colors on the walls of her hut. Perhaps Roberta Flack's—sweetly over the compacted earth—wove the most stunning mats or told the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herse f's poet. Perhaps Phillis Wheatley's mother was a poet. Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley's signature made clear.
ies, which came from my mother's lips as she only way my mother showed herself as an object to being distracted, to dying without rest, and cotton must be gathered before the first of my mother showed itself to me only after I noticed: Third Life of Grange Copeland, my mother's shabby house we were forced to live in. And sunny stand of zinnias, either. She planted s—with over fifty different varieties of plants March until late November. Before she left her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid down from the fields she might divide clumps of lilies. She replant roses, or prune branches from her tree and it was too dark to see.

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is something, for the woman who literally has sunflowers:

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice—Stout of Step
With fists as well as Hands
How they battered down Doors
And ironed Starched white Shirts
How they led Armies
Headragged Generals
Across mined Fields
Bobby-trapped Kitchens
To discover books Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we Must know
Without knowing a page Of it They themselves.

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang—in a voice like Roberta Flack's—sweetly over the compounds of her village; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village storytellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know.

Perhaps Phillis Wheatley's mother was also an artist.

Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley's biological life is her mother's signature made clear.