

# Garden

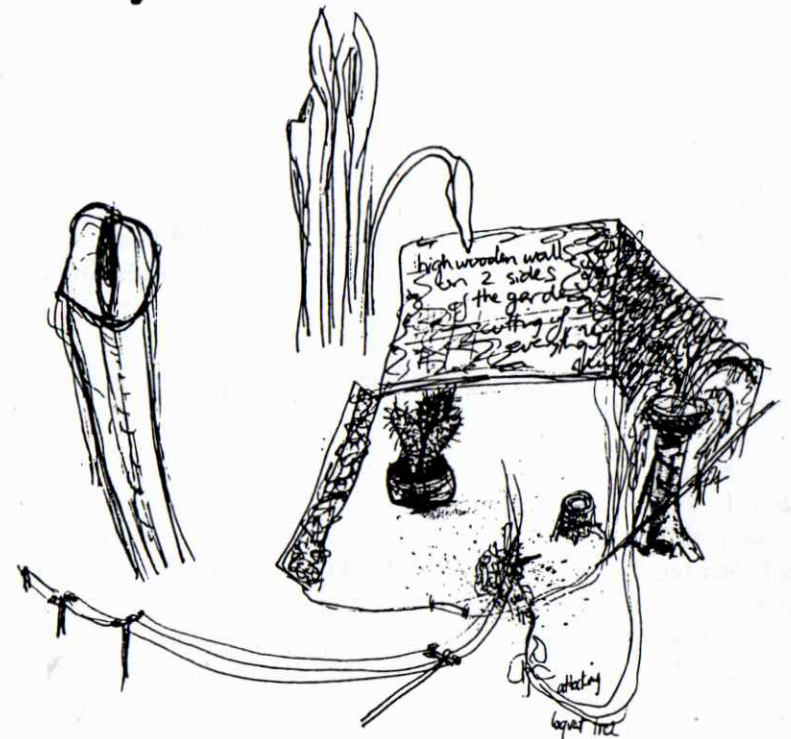


Dick McBride



# Garden

by Dick McBride



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Thank you Michael Wilding

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I walk among Calla Lilies. Am I in Africa then? I recall reading or being told once that Calla Lilies are natives of that continent. The words *Zantedeschia aethiopicum* come back to me just the same.

The lilies have grown as high as my waist, and I am taller than the average man now. Perhaps I always was. They are by far the most numerous of the plants growing in the garden. There must be at least thirty of them standing in various stages of erection. As a matter of fact there are thirty-seven for I counted them yesterday. Perhaps the day before. They do not have much odor, are not a particularly exciting plant.

One of them appears to be sick. I squat to get a closer look. It continues to droop. I have to lie down to continue my examination.

I hold its head in my hands. The white lips guarding its inflorescence fold inward sickly so that just a tip of its yellow spadix shows like an enlarged clitoris.

As a matter of fact the entire plant reminds me of a vulva growing on the tip of a rubbery penis. Strange hermaphrodite flower.

I insert my finger to see if I can rub a little life back into the plant. Primitive sensations return. The massage does not have a noticeable effect on the lily. It must be dead. I break off the head and throw it over the fence into the alley.

I remember the silly season... August Alley.

A loquat tree grows near the garden gate, slanting slightly. Its leaves reach toward a cluster of electric lines which pass high overhead and disappear into the distance, back to where the house is.

The stump of another tree is also in the garden. What it was originally I don't know, can't work out from the bark. Wish I had paid more attention to the botany professor. I recall that once in the past a crazy landlord cut the tree off four feet above the ground and nailed a birdbath to the wound. The birdbath is still there but now a green, creeping plant grows from past droppings. Its tentacles reach out in many directions, one has jumped over to the loquat tree and is slowly crawling around it, choking it. Perhaps that is why the tree is strangely barren.

In the garden also is a lemon verbena tree, leaves like long green tears. In season a beautiful subtle perfume is given off.

A few other nondescript trees and shrubs grow here and there.

There are two rose bushes which I have never seen in bloom. On certain dull days, just to have something to do, I puncture my fingers



on the thorns, then rub the blood on the plants, hoping roses will one day appear. So far, nothing...

A creeping greenery of some sort grows near one of the walls. It looks like a grapevine but I know it isn't. Although I smell crushed grapes from time to time.

High wooden walls are on two sides of the garden, cutting off everything from view. I can't see houses on the other side of these walls and wonder if there are any. On these walls, in thick profusion, grow evergreen plants with small yellow flowers. They creep. Trailing arbutus, I think. Except, the flowers on the arbutus are white or pink.

In a coal bucket in the middle of a patch of lilies and low, light green creepers is a hideous cactus of some sort. It is the color of a jaundiced elephant and as naked. Long, wicked spikes grow on it. Certain days I believe it is going to die but it always manages to pull through. I am afraid of it, ignore its existence when I can.

There are no animals in the garden. At least, none that I can see. They're near though. I can hear cats scream in the night. Dogs bark now and then. Just before sunrise a lark breaks the stillness with its clear call. In the distance I can hear seagulls.

Near the gate, under the loquat tree, is a small pile of bird lime. Sometimes I stand for hours looking into the branches, but I have never seen a birdnest nor bird of any kind. Not even a sparrow.

I have only seen three living things as long as I have been in the garden.

Once I turned over a rotting pile of grass matting which lies in a low damp spot of the garden and saw two small skinks. At first I thought they were dead. I touched them with a stick though and they turned opaque eyes at me and slithered away. Perhaps they disappeared in some unseen hole in the ground.

Once as I ate lunch I saw a snail creep across the flagstones. Its delicate body slid along slowly, head with minute antennae searching. Behind it a glistening snot-like track. I followed it, crawling on my hands and knees for some distance, watching it closely. It had never harmed me; it meant nothing to me nor I to it. Why did I kill it? Suddenly I stood up and urinated on it, piss curving down and splattering over target and stone. When I had finished, shaken off the last drop, I looked at the enemy. It had stopped crawling. Naturally. It began to disintegrate.

Soon there was nothing left but the shell. It reminded me of my crime. I felt guilty, had to destroy the evidence. I crushed the shell with my bare heel, cursing violently. Then I scraped together the pieces and, digging a hole near a lily, buried them.

The cactus now seemed uglier than ever. Shortly afterwards I began to shiver violently, although the sun was shining. I crept near the fireplace and hugged myself. There was no fire.

Stuck to the fireplace is a sign which says: NO FIRES BETWEEN THE HOURS BY ORDER OF THE POLICE DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY.

It is an ordinary fireplace just the same, made years ago, obviously by someone very inexperienced. Concrete blocks form floor and three walls. A thin, metallic hood rests crookedly on the walls. The oblong opening of the hood is covered with a smoke-blackened screen. Were there fires here sometime in the past? Perhaps before my time people enjoyed garden parties here. Inside, completely covering the grill, is a pile of paper plates, plastic cups and spoons, bread crumbs, dabs of dried mustard and ketchup, broken branches and twigs and leaves from some past pruning and my discarded clothes. In front of the fireplace is a small pool of water. I don't know why it never dries up. It is not urine. It hasn't rained in years. Nevertheless the pool has been there as long as I can remember. Some days I spend hours sailing leaves and twigs on the water, pretending many things.

What, after all, is so frightening about the garden? It is quite ordinary.

At the back of the garden is a long flight of shaky stairs. Grey paint is beginning to flake off here and there. The stairs rise above me to such a height I cannot see where they end. But this I know: at the other end of the stairs is the house where my family lives, my wife and children.

I know this - although I haven't seen them in months, perhaps years. Would I recognize them if I saw them again? Have my children grown? Has my wife become fat? Would I recognize them if I saw them?

At the front of the garden is another wall. The bottom part is of bricks, obviously made by someone quite inexperienced. The top is made of slats, green-painted wood making big tic-tac-toe designs. A green creeping thing fills all the openings however. I can't see through. This plant bears clusters of small red berries. I don't eat them for I know they are poisonous.



Calla Lilies  
Zantedeschia  
Aethiopian.  
30 erect plants.  
1m+ high.  
37.

lemon  
verbena  
scout

rose bushes

Fireplace where

subbish  
inside  
fire, clothes

alley  
has people  
detritus in it.

Not since I killed the snail have I  
killed another living thing.  
Feed bright Calisthenics  
Drink from tap real stairs  
lovely meal descriptions - childlike  
& hearty  
No attempt at communication from meal  
providor.

Seagulls in  
distance  
cats 2 dogs  
cant see  
no birds  
noon whistle

2 skins  
3 living things  
Snail

on outside  
he  
Lots happening that I can't see

Why is the garden so  
frightening then?  
Why has he never seen anyone?

No one is out there at all.



The gate is grey and of frail wood. It's locked. Along the bottom of the gate a foot-high screen is tacked, to keep me in perhaps - although with one yank I could tear the gate apart... Or to keep something out!

That must be it! To keep something out... Perhaps my enemy, a monster of some kind! A strange virus? Something with no known antidote.

Still I am not afraid, can stand for hours, looking out at the narrow cobblestone alley and the high white wall on the other side, cutting off everything from view there also. No houses rise on the other side of that wall. Are there any?

I have never seen anyone walk down the alley nor cars. Once I thought I saw a corpse-like cat slink by but could not be sure.

Some mornings the alley is littered with newspapers and scattered bits of garbage, cans and broken glass. They are not always careful, the collectors. Other days the alley is clean, perhaps following a heavy wind.

Some nights I can hear the wind. Standing now by the gate, looking, vainly, I hear other noises. All in the distance.

A voice answered by another which might be a child's voice. A fire engine's siren. Screeching of tires. A loud, metallic crash, possibly a collision of some sort. Bells - on a cable car perhaps. In the far distance the incessant wailing of foghorns. I must be near the sea.

No-one passes however. I haven't seen another person in months, perhaps years. Not since I killed the snail have I seen another living thing.

Still, I don't suffer. Someone brings me three square meals a day. This is probably my wife's doing. The food has a familiar taste. Perhaps one of the children is old enough to bring the food. Perhaps she has trained them by now. She has had time! Whoever it is is always on time.

I wake before sunrise to do calisthenics, have a drink of water from the tap near the stairs, sniff the morning air to size up what kind of day is in the offing, walk to the front gate, look over it at the alley, hoping to see someone, then back to bed for a half hour snooze.

Then it is, while I'm napping, that someone brings the morning meal, invariably the same fare: a hot cereal of some kind, well-seasoned with raisins, brown sugar, butter and thick cream; two pieces of bacon; a half grapefruit and a cup of coffee. The food is in plastic bowls and is still warm when I wake.

After eating I take bowls, one spoon (there must be a shortage of utensils in her kitchen) and coffee cup to the tap, rinse them and leave them on the bottom step to dry. A procedure I follow after each meal.

Some time during the morning, perhaps when my back is turned, or when I'm napping again, someone removes the morning dishes. I'll never understand how they can do it without attracting my attention.

Shortly after noon - of this I am certain for the sun is always overhead and also there is the noon whistle - someone slips into the garden and leaves my lunch. Although I would like to see this person there is a stronger attraction: the others who must surely use the alley. I know if I am ever to see anyone pass it will be after the noon whistle when children traditionally go home for lunch. So my back is always to the stairs at this particular time.

My lunch consists of two or three hotdogs; or hamburger browned and scrambled with rice; either a salad or lettuce, carrots and tomatoes or a bowlful of spinach (seasoned with lemon juice and salt); bread; a glass of beer and a piece of fruit (apple, orange or pear).

My evening meal is frequently a casserole of some kind; or a pork chop; or a hunk of meatloaf; a cooked vegetable (often green beans; I appreciate the garlic seasoning but wish she would remove the clove); a baked potato; an oversized mug of steaming coffee; fruit; jello; or, infrequently, a piece of cake. Cake undoubtedly means the family is celebrating a special occasion, a birthday maybe, perhaps my own.

I never really know nor can I guess when the third meal is brought into the garden, for it always seems to happen at different hours. Always, though, sometime after the 4:30 whistle.

Perhaps she is watching from the top of the stairs and when she sees I'm not looking sends one of the children down with the food. The strange thing about the entire feeding routine is that my wife never leaves a note, never tries to communicate with me in any way. Perhaps she tries. Maybe they won't let her. Maybe it isn't even my wife...

That's it, of course, they won't let her.

At least she, or someone, sees that I'm fed. She also sees that periodically I have clean blankets, removing the soiled ones, leaving fresh ones neatly wrapped in brown paper.

Near the south wall of the garden, hidden behind the lemon verbena tree, are two upright two-by-fours supporting a vine-covered roof. Evidently a construction made by someone quite inexperienced. I sleep here, underneath the roof, on a piece of old carpet.



Nearby is a trapdoor hiding a pit where I relieve myself and what seems to be an inexhaustible supply of perfumed lye.

So there is nothing I need, not even clothing. I can't remember when I decided to - take it all off, but it was some time ago. Before I raped the lily? Or after? Perhaps removing my clothes was an act of contrition. Or defiance.

Regardless, one night before retiring I took off everything and left it in a neat pile on the bottom step, thinking, perhaps, that clean clothes would be left during the night. Instead, when the sun came up the next day, my clothing had been thrown in the fireplace and there was no change. Other than that they have shown no sign of unconcern.

Why is the garden so frightening then? Perhaps it is that I am alone in it. Or maybe that my family never tries to get in touch with me. Or can't.

It is strange that no-one ever enters the garden from the alley nor comes down the steps from the house where my family surely lives.

And why have I never seen anyone walk past in the alley?

I spend most of my time at the front gate now, watching, waiting. I have almost completely ignored my other pastimes: exercise, walking among the Calla Lilies, looking for skinks and snails, lying in the sunshine, thinking.

I'm becoming flabby. I no longer get an erection, not even in the morning, waking with a full bladder. It just dangles. Am I older than I think? Or is it punishment for past crimes? sins?

Hour after hour I stand by the gate now, watching, holding onto the slats, peering through. The only times I leave are to eat, sleep and relieve myself. I am beginning to get worried.

Now I stand in front of the gate, perspiring. I begin to shiver with fear of something I cannot express. I imagine all the people who might, who must walk in the alley.

Children going home from school, the postman, delivery men of all kinds, housewives, working men, cripples, perhaps tramps from different countries, even dogs and cats.

Would I recognize anyone should I ever see another person? Would he recognize me? What would I say? How would we greet each other?

I must say something, whistling does no good, nor clearing my throat.

Hi I call suddenly! Hello there! How are you? Good morning. Good evening. Nice day. Think it will rain? Hello.

I call louder, screaming now. I scream my greeting to invisible people until I am exhausted, until I am blue in the face. I lean against the gate, silent at last, still watching, still waiting.

I could break out easily but don't make the effort. Some strange lassitude, or fear, stops me.

I have been a prisoner too long!

Suddenly from a great distance she calls me. At last! her voice sounds strange, unreal. I am not positive I recognize it.

What's wrong she calls? Who are you talking to? What's wrong down there? Who is it?

I turn, look toward the stairs, which rise to such a height I cannot see where they end.

No-one! It is always the same. Even now, no-one.

Again her voice: Who are you calling? Why are you shouting?

I turn to look back at the alley, crying. Real tears are on my face now.

There are many people out there I shout, many people!

But I know, as I scream greetings, and she knows, as I continue to scream, that no-one is out there, no-one at all.



## about the author

Dick McBride was born in Indiana in 1928. Before he was fully committed to writing, he worked as a radio announcer, then moved to San Francisco in the early '60s to pursue writing more seriously. He befriended Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and several other noted Beat scene writers, and worked in City Lights bookstore. He has since lived in Australia and England, where he was an independent book distributor for many years. Dick has also been an actor and spoken word performer. He has performed his poetry at Frog's Cafe, Malvern Arts Festival and an Oxfam Benefit in recent months. In the past year, his fiction and prose poetry has been published in *The Rue Bella*, *Em* and *The Main Street Journal*. His books include *The Astonished I* (sketches from San Francisco years) and *Jacqui* (poems to Dick's late wife), both available from the author. His voice is on the music meets spoken word CD *Aresols & Nicknames*. His collection *Composed while Walking the Dog* is forthcoming from ANNIHILATOR.

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## about the illustrator

Andrew Stattmann is a graduate of North Adelaide School of Art. He won the 1999 Heysen Prize for Australian Landscape. He lives in the Adelaide Hills.



Who is in the garden?

