

A close-up photograph of a field of tall, golden-brown grasses. The background is a soft, out-of-focus sunset sky with warm orange and yellow tones. A single, vibrant red flower is visible in the middle ground, partially obscured by the grass. The overall mood is serene and natural.

short form.

An Egret in Flight Amanda Hurley

Every sunset reminds me that an ending can also be beautiful. As the golden glow of the fading sun warms the windows of the glasshouse, I feel I am seeing the day's end as if for the first time. There's a ray of light peering cautiously through the windows at the far end, illuminating the hothouse in a myriad of colors. The light seems to dance with tiny speckles of radiance as if the conservatory is a cut diamond, its facets awash with gleaming prisms.

I'm sure it's not me just imagining it; it's as if every plant in the greenhouse has turned on its axis to bathe a flower, a leaf in this sublime, glowing light. There's a rustle of movement so quiet it's soundless, a sixth sense that you can never quite witness with your eyes. A hellebore I could swear a moment ago was facing in another direction now stands to full attention, its white delicate petals quivering with energy; a mariposa lily turns cupped hands, its praying petals bronzed by the dying rays of light.

As the sun dips down behind the hills and shadows creep across the fields, the ghostly hand of twilight is a precursor of the night to come. Inside the greenhouse, flowers close and plants curl in on themselves, leaves are tightly budded away; like every night, we sleep when the light is gone.

There's an ache in my bones as I too settle in for the night. My old army cot stretches as I nestle into its familiar bulge, carved by decades of rest. The rough woolen blanket that I pull to my throat covers a body of loosened flesh, my skin baggy where once taut, sticky with disease. I am the third in my line to tend to the plants in this greenhouse. There are varieties here that are the descendants of seeds my grandfather smuggled with him on his return to Germany from Brazil, hidden in knots in the hand-embroidered handkerchiefs his mother had made for him during the war.

My grandfather. My father. Me.

There is another kind of twilight creeping over the nursery now; I have no family, no children to whom I can gift my own inheritance. When I am gone, so too will my glasshouse disappear.

I sleep then, my dreams mingling as always with those of the plants I tend. Like every night, I am sent on journeys to continents I will never explore. Images like photographs on a camera screen flicker before my eyes.

Click. The Mexican moonlight cactus unfurls long pink petals to reveal a soft, anemone-like center. A sweetened fragrance fills the air and a dozen grey whispery-feathered moths appear to feed on this one-night-only flower that tomorrow will be withered and gone.

Click. I am in a forgotten rainforest in China; lush undergrowth drips with moisture and strappy green leaves hide

small, stolen treasures. My dream self, shrunk to the size of a bee, settles on a habenaria radiata; the orchid's delicate frayed flowers shaped like an egret in flight. In my mind's eye, the tiny white blossoms shiver and become alive, launch themselves like soft, silver rain. Petals beat unseen wings as the flowers hover in the air beside me.

Click. One egret follows as I return to the forests of my native Germany, her feathered wings tinkling as delicately as a glockenspiel amidst the gloaming of pine, spruce, beech, oak. I land on a soft moss that springs below my feet. The dark woods hum with danger; the wild-growing forest flowers are a poisoner's delight. I am home.

Click. Thirsty from the long flight, my winged companion settles on a wild-growing fuchskeraut, a tall, freestanding foxglove. Its blooms, shaped like thimbles, are sprinkled with purple confetti, maiden's bonnets that hide secret chambers to entice a cautious bird inside.

"No! It's poisonous!" I cry in my dream, unable to fight through layers of sleep to prevent my friend from sending an inquiring beak into the plant's enticing bells. She drinks, my egret, and the nectar has an immediate effect. Her delicate feathered blooms shudder and fall; her petalled wings leave dust on my fingertips as they wither away.

Click.

I am awake, sitting upright on my army cot; the woolen blanket tumbled to the floor beside me. Even the air in the hothouse feels heavy and poisoned. I have always loved the ripe hummus aroma of my greenhouse; now it is cloying and heavy to my lungs. I push myself up and out of the cot, hastening to the heavy doors to pull them aside and let in great gulps of cool night air.

I do not want to be the one to disband the greenhouse; to sell each plant at a bargain price, to watch as my begonias, orchids, poinsettias are carried away to car boots lined with newspaper, stuffed into bicycle bags. To bear witness to the nursery emptied of plants, sacks bare of bulbs. The last of the spilled soil swept into a corner, the long-whiskered marks of the broom left behind in the dust. The hothouse, vacant of life, shrunken in its emptiness.

And me? My last remaining months of life - I shudder to think of the room in the nursing unit reserved in my name. The smell of disinfectant instead of potting mix, breakfast served on a sterile tray instead of plucked from a ripe cherry tomato bush, sweetened with freshly-cut chives.

There's a lightening in the sky now, the first brightness of the false dawn, the basic notes of the early morning songbirds. Unwittingly I remember that every beginning can also be beautiful. As I sit just outside the conservatory's main door waiting for the warmth of the day, I feel my grandfather, my father standing as if just behind me. Their solid gnarled hands rest on my shoulders, nails still clotted with earth, fingers calloused from work. It is enough, they seem to say.

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