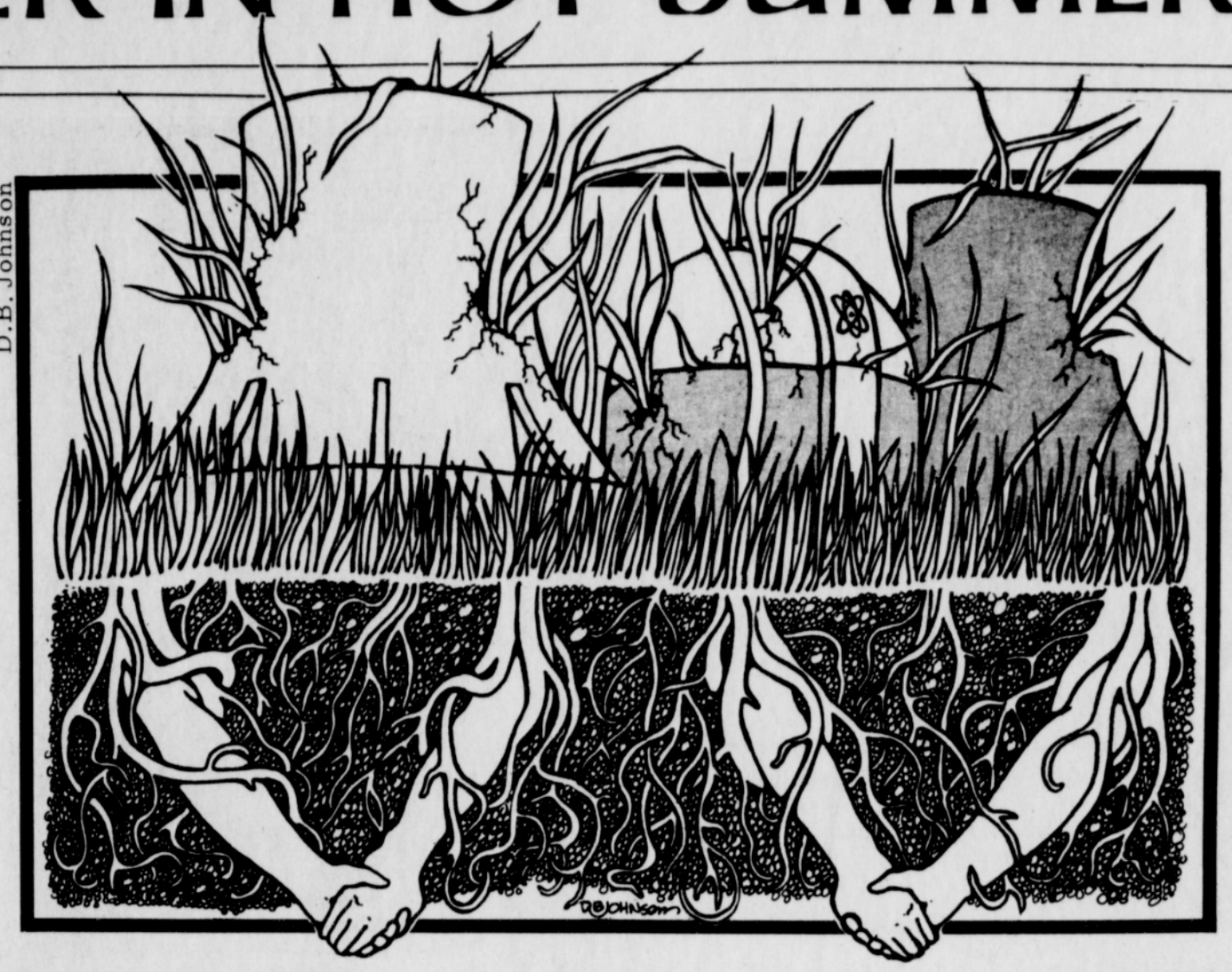
MY MOTHER IN HOT SUMMER

by Walt Curtis



The heat gets to her. It's the disease, multiple sclerosis. The nerves act funny. Like a wilting flower, a fading rose, my wonderful mother diminishes a day at a time. I watch her dragging around the house. She is so calm, intelligent, cheerful, yet she knows. Her hair is snow-gray, and her feet are red and blotchy from poor circulation. When I help her cut her fingernails, her hand is cool, without strength.

She is so serene. She manages such composure in a lonely house. My dad died of cancer four years ago and left her alone. It's just like my Aunt Emma said, "Margaret's physical condition seems poorer, but her brains are as bright as ever." Mom heard that from her other sister, Aunt Cel. They talk on the phone all of the time.

Aunt Emma and Uncle Ray visited her for a few days in June. He's got a plastic aorta and arteries into his groin. But he's really active, with a strong handshake. Stronger than mine. An aneurysm was discovered in his aorta. It was about ready to burst — an ineffectual doctor had been treating him for an ulcer. He decided to go to somebody else, and the good doctor sent him immediately into surgery. He's recovered, smokes cigarettes and keeps busy all the time. Aunt Emma smokes also, drinks bourbon, and figures out things for him to do.

Uncle Ray cleaned out the garage, with the leaking roof. My father's mechanic tools are mainly spoiled, by the rain and damp made rusty. The tools he earned a living with. It's shameful, but — What the hell were we to do? None of his sons was a mechanic. Nobody wanted to be greedy, after his death — and sell them. So for sentimental reasons, they deteriorated. There are a million things to do around this place. It's only three acres, but impossible to take care of on a part time basis.

The goddamn blackberry vines have grown over the garage, up into the pear trees. I will have to use the right kind of herbicide in order to stop them. They are incredibly tenacious, rooting everywhere on the property. You can cut, chop, hack — still they thrive.

The yellow tansy ragweed has spread throughout the summer countryside. Its bright yellow top pops up everywhere. It's supposedly poisonous to livestock but they generally eat around it. Swishing reddish brown tails, the chestnut horses of our neighbors ignore it. Mom, as my dad did before her, allows the neighbors to pasture the horses in our field. No sense letting the hay go to waste. The goats next door ignore it.

There is a brown and yellow worm — tiger-striped — which eats some of the ragged flowery tops. Is this bug an ecological answer? Still I see the damned yellow weed growing everywhere. I lop it off with a sickle, or try to pull it up. The brittle stem breaks, leaving the basal leaves to revive next year. It should be dug up with a shovel, but who the hell is going to go to that trouble under the hot summer sun? Mopping sweat off my balding forehead. Not me!

The fluffy headed thistles are going to seed. I try to knock them down. So their gray heads won't blow fluff on the wind. I feel heroic chopping at the weeds with a hand sickle. Prince Valiant. I am losing, but some of the weeds go down before my swipes. For my mother trapped in her castle. The weapon is rusty, from standing too long in the damp garage. I know she appreciates the sporadic effort. There are grass seeds, burrs, in my socks and tennis shoes. The natural timothy grass, hay, holds its own pretty well, but stickery thistles, brambles, hawthorne, tansy, dandelions have pretty much overrun the property. It's a real battle. The years, Time and its vegetational allies, are winning. The mice. The moles...

There are a half dozen things to do every time I visit: Empty the garbage. Help cook dinner. Water and weed the garden. Sometimes I thaw a can of lemonade, squeeze real lemons and limes to add to the store-bought mixture. Help my mother with a shaking hand sip the lemonade and swallow a vitamin pill. However, I enjoy visiting my teenage homestead. I relish the longevity of it and the ironies of time. Our human persistence against its slow, subtle, overwhelming force.

I could never take my father's place. All I can do is help my mother a little. Come out once a week. Take the garden hose and water the rhododendrons, the robin's egg blue hydrangea, the climbing red roses called "Crimson Rambler." The garden. As I hold the green hose watching the cold clear water spurt over the shiny green leaves, I recall my dad used to do the same thing. Daily water every damn shrub, plant, and bush on the place — so the hot summer sun wouldn't burn them up. His calloused hands touched this same green plastic hose Cold clear refreshing Clackamas River water flowing out.

As a joke he'd turn the spray on Mike the dog or suddenly zap the white geese. Sending them honking or Mike whimpering away out of range. The old man loved a good joke. At the end, he thought his coming demise was a bad one.

This year the zucchini in the garden are prolific. Mottled green marble, they are baseball bats which will swell monstrously huge. Into football-sized objects. From beneath the golden blossom swells this thickening phallic vegetable. The stiff stems and angular leaves scrabble over the ground, securing territory. I pick them up and give them away, and still more grow.

Our family always had a wonderful garden, planted and growing, in the backyard. There is nothing as tasty as fresh sunripened tomatoes, carrots, beets, or green onions, pulled directly from the dirt, washed and placed on the table for the evening meal. My first "garden" poem was "Cabbages In The Garden." In 1975, I published the collection "The Sunflower and Other Earth Poems", which for me made a definitive statement about being alive.

We belong with the carrots, the bunny rabbits, the sunflowers; we have a season as they do. To ask for more than that is folly. I began to accept the notion that death is appropriate after a normal lifespan, probably even desirable. To go back into the earth. It is a terrible mistake to try to create a bionic immortality with technology. We will all end up to be zombies if we're not careful.

The poems and this philosophy, as well as being derived intellectually from Zen, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, etc., come from my family background. My dad always planted a garden. That was a common ordinary cultural activity of Americans in the first half of this century. I experienced it directly by hoeing, pulling weeds, spading the gorund with a shovel, using animal fertilizer, watering the plants. An earthworm writhes that the shovel has cut in two. The worm turns, and one day will devour us.

I remember seeing my younger brother Wayne in a photograph, about four years old, posing behind a gigantic cabbage, maybe weighing sixty pounds which was grown in our home garden in Olympia, Washington. The cabbage was as large as he was. Does that explain why the cabbages in the early poem seem so anthropomorphic? There is the innuendo of "cabbage patch" children in the poem, also, poor little bastards abandoned by their cruel mothers.

I admit this year's garden is somewhat ravaged. Without my dad working in it daily. My sister Nancy and I have tried, with intermittent watering and weeding, to salvage it. The neighbor's goats did a number on it. But the tomatoes look good, the cucumbers and zucchini are quite productive. It looks sprightly with marigolds and a row of red zinnias. The tradition has been maintained. That's what counts — the spirit which is put into a project. More so than the results. Human affairs are measured as much by concern, sincerity, and authenticity as they are by actual accomplishment.

I wonder if the quality of life on Earth isn't diminishing daily as we approach the twenty-first century. I am certain that it is. Everywhere in the world. Only an ecological ethos, spreading with religious fervor and acting as an operational political force internationally, will save us and planet Earth. Most of the larger mammals and the anthropologically diverse cultures of humanity are becoming extinct. It's a sad and terrible thought that this evolutionary organic complexity should die out in just a few generations.

The cabbages are asking themselves the question, "Will we be exterminated, along with the other plants and creatures in the coming nuclear holocaust?" If humans filled the muzzles of the guns with earth and shit and buried the missile silos in compost we might survive the coming decades in the northern hemisphere. Otherwise — no. We should shut down the nuclear power plants which contaminate the biosphere with radioactive filth in every direction, for succeeding generations. We must dismantle the weapons systems.

The Trojan Nuclear Power Plant, located forty-five miles from Portland, near Mount Saint Helens, on the Columbia River, is the second largest such plant in the United States. Many assume Oregon is an ecological paradise. The gigantic cooling tower looms in the pristine landscape like a clay burial jar, a death urn. Accumulating and disseminating arcane poisons which have never existed before. When I first saw it, I was startled by its design and reminded of the long melancholy on mortality, "Urn Burial" by Sir Thomas Browne. There it is — made manifest by modern technology: the eerie coffin shape of the future.

Walt Curtis, who lives in Portland, is Oregon's unofficial poet laureate.

Cabbages In The Garden

They are nine in number.
Their outer leaves are of odd animals,
rhinos', an armadillo's ears smashed flat.
Rooted solid,
their heads are little green suns
or ugly crystal balls.
Poor cabbage has no close neighbors,
except rhubarb, with her red limbs
and elephant's ears.
The cabbage in my garden are so sad:
they are like moons fallen out of sky.
I want to cry
viewing them so forlorn and serious.
Worrying about coleslaw and saurkraut,
I promise never to eat them.
Instead, I will send them to an orphanage
in a big basket tied with Easter ribbons.
"Don't worry, my dear cabbage —
My little darlings! I won't beat you."

— WALT CURTIS