

On Sunday before the bad weather arrived, I walked through the garden, uttering a half-serious warning under my breath to the inhabitants to be wary of the approaching storm. I wondered, though, if they might already have an awareness of what was on the way. Who's to say they didn't? As noted author and plant ecologist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, has said, "studies don't ever show that plants can do less than we think they can." Sensing what's on the way and being able to do something about it are two different things, however, and even though John Fahey always considered this garden a trial garden, I couldn't help but feel a helplessness and a nascent sense of mourning for what was to come. Adolfo and his crew had wrapped a few of the less cold hardy plants in the garden, but even their ability to survive the expected temperatures was in doubt. In fact, if the forecast turned out to be accurate, there wouldn't be one plant in the entire garden that had ever had to endure such temperatures, and certainly not for such an extended period of time. And this without considering the impact of the accompanying snow and sleet and ice that was predicted.

I looked out the window Monday morning and it was mostly sunny but the ground was blanketed by two inches of snow. My first response was an almost simultaneous appreciation for both the beauty and the strangeness of the view. It was odd to see the palmetto frond leaflets defined by snow. Odd to see snow nestled in the recesses of agave leaves. Odd to see the Yucca Rostrata shadows cast on such a crisp, high contrast surface. One of the reasons John Fahey used pea gravel as a ground cover was because he liked the way the plants' shadows were cast on it. I wondered how he judged their effect on snow. The snow also made manifest the comings and goings of the nocturnal animals in the garden. I tried to imagine what had influenced their paths. Were they carrying on as usual? Or were they, like me, surveying the property for the sake of pure interest in seeing what things looked like in two inches of snow? Their tracks animated their presence in the garden for me and reminded me that they too call the garden their home and complete their routines whether or not I'm aware of them. Where the snow provided explicit evidence of the earthbound creatures in the garden, it only heightened the absence of evidence regarding the cause of death of the multiple birds I discovered on my walks. I found them all over the garden with no indication of how they perished, all appearing as though they had died in flight and then drifted to the ground, touching down in the snow without the least bit of disturbance.

Wednesday morning brought new harm – overnight rain and sleet had coated every surface of the garden, freezing to icy sheaths that weighted down limbs and stems. The stand of bamboo outside my window looked as though a bomb had detonated in its center, trunks as tall as three stories arched all the way to the ground, bent by the weight of the ice. Elsewhere, most of our Cone Cactus (*Neobuxbaumia polylopha*) either collapsed somewhere along their spine or toppled over, pulling their root ball out of the ground. By this time many of the agaves had started showing the effects, their lower leaves collapsed, appearing pickled and mushy, while

their tightly wrapped conical centers remained atilt but upright, bringing to mind a narwhal tusk. In some instances the effect of the ice was dazzling but the knowledge of at least a rough sense of its consequences compromised my enjoyment of it. Rilke's well known line from the Duino Elegies, "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure...." came to mind. Rilke might chafe at such a literal reading but there was literal truth in it for me. We usually experience beauty with a sense of pleasure and well being; this form of beauty brought none of that. It was very uncomfortable, in fact, and was attended by a felt obligation to deny the beauty I was seeing. A case where knowledge, however general, insisted on taking precedence over visual pleasure.

After the snow began to melt there was a subtlety to the colors and textures in the garden that one doesn't normally see. They were odd and disturbing at first, with subtle yellows and dull, mousy tans replacing the wide range of greens and blues normally found this time of year. The surfaces of the leaves, too, held fascinating displays of textures and patterns totally unexpected. In time, and with a conscious effort to look at the plants objectively, I began to see extraordinary beauty. When Uri hit, the Camellias were just ramping up, so many blooms were hit hard by the freeze. A few days later there was a transparency to them that reminded me of the appearance of my mother's fingers the last few days of her life, and I felt gratitude for this affirmation of the binding connection we share with the plant world.

In the aftermath of the storm as warmer temperatures have returned, the garden has continued to change on a daily basis. The color palette in particular has been fluid. The early wash of the subtle yellows and beiges has seemed to transform more toward a range of browns. Even though there are still plenty of signs of damage and the outcome of some plants is still very much in doubt, every day seems to bring more green back into the garden, stubbornly wedging its way between the dead leaves, slowly reestablishing and rewarding one's expectations of what a garden should look like.

My personal day to day experience is heavily weighted by aesthetic appraisals. My personal experience of the storm has caused me to better appreciate the influence that expectations, scale (both temporal and physical), consequences, and death, have on those appraisals. From a horticultural perspective, I would hope that a careful witnessing of the impact of such a storm, embracing what might be initially considered as ugly or merely evidence of damage, and extolling its strange beauty, could be considered a form of respect for the plants and nature's process. With another nod to the idea that plants are likely capable of more than we know, I hold out some hope that maybe they appreciate the gesture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Prof' or similar, written in a cursive style.