



Vol. 2, No. 2 – Fall 2005

### *Reblooming*

A remontant iris has never won the Dykes Medal.

*Autumn Tryst, Sugar Blues, Immortality* : these remontant irises will bloom gloriously in June and then flower again in the fall, at least according to the garden catalog.

The Dykes Medal is the Nobel Prize of irises, again, according to the garden catalog.

*Hello Darkness* won the Dykes Medal in 1999, the year I was dying. The year I was born, *First Violet* was awarded the Dykes Medal.

**It is October.** I've had lovers who have loved this time of year.

*Crisp*, they would cry out, as if it were an endearment. They would wear tweed, suède, boots, leather, scarves. Their bedrooms would be cold at night, but they would be naked as if it were summer.

*Crisp*, they would moan.

It was just one more thing about them I could not - - - would not - - - understand.

I was tiresome even at twenty.

The orchid-like flowers of an iris have six petals: the three inner ones that point up are called standards, and three outer ones that point down are called falls. Each flower lasts about three days over a total bloom time of about a month.

Later, I moved to the tropics, where autumn did not matter and the gardens in my neighborhoods brimmed with bougainvillea and hibiscus, but contained nothing eligible for the Dykes Medal.

Iris normally require vernalisation (prolonged exposure to cold) to flourish.

The procedure is called cryosurgery, the doctors explained, but not very well, although I affirmed I understood everything there was to understand by signing the informed consent documents.

They were going to freeze my liver; I might have a chance to survive.

Iris normally bloom when the temperatures and available light approximate early summer in Great Britain.

The procedure will require mass infusions of highly toxic substances, the doctors explained, seeming sanguine, resigned to my death. I let their chemical cures set me on fire, scorching my inner landscape so that nothing could grow, which was, after all, the goal.

Reblooming is a recessive trait, like many diseases.

**It is October** and she sends me a card with an image by Georgia O'Keeffe, "Black Iris." We were lovers the year *Vanity* won the Dykes Medal, when it seemed that O'Keeffe was a dyke. Just like Virginia Woolf. Just like Eleanor Roosevelt. Patti Smith. Just like every woman, really.

I miss such innocence.

A self iris has the same color standards and falls. A complete self on a bearded iris will have the same color beards, those elongations of fuzzy hairs at the upper base of all three falls. *Vanity* is a self iris, complete in pink, but incomplete if one can discern the reddish tone to its embarrassing beards.

O'Keeffe had her Steiglitz, Woolf her Leonard, and E.R., her Franklin. Patti Smith had Mapplethorpe but he was a lovely faggot, at least according to the biographies.

And she, she had her husband,  
as I reminded her, tirelessly.

She smelled of crushed violets, like a woman whose best seasons had passed.

Someone said I was her “mid-life crisis.”  
I assumed I was her reblooming.

“Life is longer than you think,” she told me.  
I was not quite sure what she meant by that  
(it seemed to have something to do with staying married until the children were  
grown),  
but in any case, I disagreed, even then.

Life is much shorter than I ever thought.

She is still alive, although her children are in their twenties and her husband has  
left her, for a younger man.  
And other lovers, other women, on the very same page of my address book are  
dead, dead, dead.

Bone meal spread on the ground after the first blooming is recommended.

**It is October.** The Women’s Literature professor reads to us from Woolf’s *A  
Room Of One’s Own*, inflaming our passions.  
It is the year *New Moon* wins the Dykes Medal. This iris is bearded. Tall. A self.  
Ruffled petals. Lemon. Yellow.  
I would have thought it dark; dark as the new moon buried deep in the night  
sky.

She cultivates the students she wants to take to bed.  
I do not go.  
Although my girlfriend does, pursuing her prize, wearing my leather jacket, my  
purple suéde boots.

Later, I will later have sex in the bathroom of the National Museum of Women’s  
Art after seeing an O’Keeffe exhibit. (No Dykes Medal will be awarded that  
year).

Later, I will later have sex in the bathroom of a refurbished Tampa theatre and  
miss Patti Smith tumbling off the stage. (*Dream Lover* is announced as the winner  
of the Dykes medal).

I will not have sex at Roosevelt House, a New York City Landmark, although I  
will go there numerous times. The building, dedicated by Eleanor while her  
husband was off meeting with Churchill and *Prairie Sunset* was being announced  
as the Dykes Medal winner, is now owned by the city university where I am  
employed.

I left the tropics.

Inexplicable, because every autumn finds me moaning, protesting, against the pronouncements.

*It is Leather Weather, You Need Cuddly Sweaters, The Tweed Jacket is Back, Time for Fall Planting,*

at least according to the catalogs

that blow across the doorsteps of my neighborhood, as innocent as leaves.

"It's your hormones," someone says.

Under the snow-blanket of anesthesia, my body dug open like a field, my mind brittle as an amethyst, I must have imagined myself Persephone. Or else a rhizome. But certainly someone or something who believed Spring was always possible, even in New England.

I read about a breeder of irises, a geneticist, a mad scientist, who could have been a doctor searching for a cure for this or for that, if only the conditions had been better, if only he had been from a better stock. Instead he spent the short days of his short life pollinating and cross-breeding, seeking that deepest darkest purple. Seeking that ruffle, that vigorous grower, that contrasting beard, that reverse amoena pattern. Seeking the reward of a Dykes Medal. Then another one.

No one can determine the extent of the hormonal damage to my body.

No one knows what hormonal influences cause certain irises to rebloom.

**It is October.** Our neighborhood empties.

There are thirteen dyke houses in our little subdivision of fifty houses on the North Fork of Long Island, a two hour commute to the city for those of us who do not have apartments in Chelsea, or Park Slope, or the Upper East Side.

Thirteen is over the average, I know.

One comes. Then more come.

I suppose that's what the non-dyke neighbors think.

That we spread like irises.

The rich dykes, with twins and a housekeeper, with an au pair and a gardener, live nearest the water. The dykes who are breaking up or maybe not live around the corner. Next door to them, lives the dyke who has a new lover every week, the most recent one looking as if she is an adolescent, which is shrugged off with "mid life crisis" as an explanation. On the next street live the pair with the big dog and the bearded irises who promise me - - - promise me - - - that they will

give me some of their rhizomes when they divide them this year, but they never do.

No one ever says "dykes."

Everyone in the neighborhood, including the dykes, says "ladies."

Or "girls."

I cannot decide which one I find more offensive.

I am instructed that "dyke" is an insult.

So I try to say it as often as possible.

Long past twenty, I can still be tiresome.

"I just love Edith Wolford," I proclaim, feigning innocence.

"Who?"

"Edith Wolford. The iris. Winner of the Dykes Medal in 1993. A Dykes Medal bi-color. Easy to grow, like most Dykes winners. Propagated by Ben Hager, winner of other Dykes Medals, at least according to his obituary.

A vigorous bloomer, as is typical of Dykes.

But not a rebloomer."

I know fewer and fewer dykes.

The dykes in my neighborhood are not dykes, at least according to themselves.

The dykes I wished were dykes were not dykes, they were married women.

The dykes I see when I think I see dykes are transgendered; they are women transitioning to men. Often this involves surgery. Chemicals. Hormones.

I know more and more dykes who have died.

The dykes who sought out the prize of suicide, some with the efficiency of knives or ropes, and others with the cold burn of needles or bourbon.

The dykes who wandered into the wrong garden, only to be burnt, or frozen, or buried, as they were driving home, mountain-climbing, scuba-diving.

The dykes who struggled against the early twilight of the hospital, sipping their sugar water, vomiting up the orange medicines that had been injected into their collapsing veins, holding their lovers hand for the last time, again and again.

The rhizomes of the iris, known as orris root, have medicinal uses including cathartic properties. The roots can also be dried and are valued in perfumery for their violet scents and fixative properties.

**It is October** and everything is orange. Pumpkins. Gourds. Mums. The leaves floating from the sugar maples. The sunsets that come too early.

Orange? What kind of color is that?

I find it unnatural. Perfect only for being mocked by the bright blue of the sky.  
I am partial to purple.

She was wearing purple when she told me she valued the evanescent, the ephemeral, the fleeting.

She said she loved that full-moon moment when everything is ripe;

but I could only think that in the very next moment something would be rotten.

These were the years of *Shipshape* and *Pink Taffeta*. Blue, blue and pink, pink: the romance of being whole; the romance of the self.

She seemed so optimistic.

As if she would live forever.

If one of us was going to be dead, I would have guessed it would be me.

The dentist asks me if I've suffered from radiation to my jaw.

I do not respond.

The optometrist tells me that I have the eyes of a sixty-five year old man.

I have not only aged twenty years, I've changed genders.

The gynecologist comments that I have "some scar."

I want to tell her that I have been grafted, hybridized, frozen, and bisected.

But - - -

But I am alive.

Her blood was everywhere when they found her. My purple suède boots were no longer purple and no longer soft and no longer prized.

There was no moon. It was autumn. Perhaps she was lying when she said she loved the season, as she had lied about loving so much else.

Iris come in every color and tone with the exception of true red.

**It is October.** They are lifting the pleasure boats out of the water.

The dykes and the men and the ones in transition strain their muscles, despite the hoists and the wheels. The boats moan.

I'm in the marina. Sitting at the bar with my Cabernet, swirling it in the glass, pretending I do not remember that this is the anniversary of death (as if every day isn't).

"A woman's life ends at forty," she told me.

I was not yet twenty and did not know what she meant by that

(it seemed to have something to do her staying sufficiently young to attract our aging women's literature professor).

But in any case, I disagreed, even then.

Life is more unpredictable than I thought,  
even after I read the biographies,  
home from the hospital, propping the books on a pillow next to my head, trying  
to believe in resurrection.

At the age of 48, Eleanor Roosevelt experiences a “new level of freedom,  
excitement, energy, robust health” like “many women at midline,”  
at least according to Volume Two of her life.

At the age of 46, Georgia O’Keeffe has a physical and mental breakdown and is  
hospitalized, becoming terrified of water and of her husband. Soon, all her  
paintings became arid. Gradually, she leaves her husband.  
(One biography is titled *Full Bloom*).

At the age of 57, Patti Smith releases a new album, her years as a “housewife”  
married to Fred “Sonic” Smith and living in the Midwest, behind her,  
now that Fred has been buried.

At the age of 56, Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, following the  
publication of *The Years* the year before, and *The Waves* six years before that, with  
*Flush* falling in between, not to mention articles and more articles.

The Women’s Literature professor believed it was only sexism that prevented  
Virginia Woolf from winning the Noble Prize in Literature.  
But that is not the prize that goes to the suicide.

Eleanor Roosevelt did not win the Nobel Peace Prize, although her ancestor,  
Theodore Roosevelt, did.

There is no Nobel Prize in Art or Music.

There is no Nobel Prize in life or love or not being tiresome.

Irises need regular water throughout the growing season, but especially after the  
flowers fade, for this is when the next season's growth is initiated.

**It is October** and the Nobel Foundation announces its awards.

The Laureates in both Peace and Literature are women.

Wangari Maathai, 64, from Kenya, was divorced by her husband in the 1980s, who complained that she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control," at least according to the newspapers.

Elfriede Jelinek, 58, from Austria is a "reclusive feminist" who lives with her mother and writes novels in which sadomasochistic desires predominate, in keeping with her theme that male aggression distorts the world, at least according to the same newspapers.

*Crowned Heads* wins the Dykes Medal. It is a reverse blue amoena with blue standards and white falls. A few years ago, *Stairway to Heaven* won the Dykes Medal. It is also a blue amoena, but not reverse. Its standards are white and its falls are blue. These irises do not seem to be related. *Stairway to Heaven* is a child of *Edith Wolford*. *Crowned Heads* claims *Honky Tonk Blues* as its parent.

I wonder if the Women=s Literature professor is still alive.  
And if the Nobel awards make her happy.  
I wonder if she ever married, ever had children, ever became a real dyke.

I do not wonder if my girlfriend who had sex with our professor has risen from the dead. The myth of Persephone is a myth of the soil, not of dykes.

Virginia Woolf buried herself in the river.  
O'Keeffe, reputed to be frail her entire life, lived to be 98.

I spent my twenties drowning between the legs of women older than forty.  
Just past forty myself, I was told I should not expect to survive the surgery.

The surgeon split me down the middle and clamped me open.  
The mystic rubbed valerian oil into the soles of my feet.

The full moon seemed an omen,  
but of what?

In the hospital, I received flowers; not all of them were purple.  
Some of them were orchids, potted in pottery. They lasted the longest.  
I wait for them to flower again.

The iris is named for the Greek goddess who is the rainbow. She is both the messenger and the path between sky and earth upon which the message is transmitted. She leads the souls of dead women to the Elysian Fields, the neighborhood of the dead. She tells Demeter about her daughter Persephone. She is married to the west wind and is the mother of Eros.

**It is October.** My lover and I dig into the dirt of our yard, planting the rhizomes of the iris, believing that June is predictable.

I have always prized the future.  
A common mistake is to plant the iris rhizomes too deeply.

My lover: I will call her Iris. I will tell you that when I met Iris, it was as if I'd just won the Dykes Medal, the Nobel Prize, *Immortality*.

I will say that I took a long time to know to know her: that she grew up in an orange grove and that her mother was dying and that she had never taken a women's literature course and that she was not an artist or a musician or a politician or married or over forty or suicidal or a breeder of flowers.

She was my reblooming. Or so it seemed.

Iris made autumn bearable. My moaning, my mourning, my tiresome tirades; I could transcend them. She was medicinal. She was a favonian breeze. She was early summer.

It was October when Iris sat next to me in the doctors' offices as they told me, one after another, that I was as good as dead, and although there was this or that procedure that was experimental, they didn't want to plant any false hope. We should prepare the ground to receive me.

In my case, I disagreed.

It is more than five years later. Sixty seven moons. Each one a reward, unearned.

They say the reblooming is shorter, not as vigorous, not as prolific, when compared to the initial blooming. They say the colors are not as brilliant, the self is not as pure, the fragrance more diffuse. They say many things.

They have their trophies.  
I have my tiresome disagreements.

We are thinking of moving back to the tropics.  
We would have a new address, a new neighborhood, a new garden; we would be the new dykes.

The climate in the more tropical zones is not especially favorable for irises, but those that do thrive are often remontant, and a very few will bloom throughout the year.