

The Pasqueflower

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"The chance to find [one]," wrote Aldo Leopold,
"is a right as inalienable as free speech"

Earliest among the rites of the western spring is the blossoming of the pasqueflower, which, like the eastern arbutus, precedes by a month the rest of the vernal flora. Its precocious beauty accounts for its name, a flower of the *Pasque*, Easter; and its loveliness, size, and season led Aldo Leopold to introduce his *Sand County Almanac* with the plea that "the chance to find a pasqueflower is a right as inalienable as free speech." Recently, just after the equinox, hiking a meadow in the foothills of the Rockies, I delighted in thousands in finest bloom, with nothing else out save the aspen catkins.

Its finding is a joy immediately in the aesthetic encounter, but beyond that, this windflower is a cherished symbol of the wild for reasons that run deeper. In its annual renewal as the first spirited flowering against the blasts of winter, it is a sign against the eternal storm. Like the daffodil in Shakespeare's England, the pasqueflower dares to "take the winds of March with beauty," and such a brave flower can help us ponder what it means to live

in and against the wild. So I venture here to let the meeting of it take a philosophical turn.

Winter in the Rockies is too much a still and lifeless scene, save for, or yet more truly because of, the howling wind. The beauty is of icy peaks, glistening snowfields, crystalline flakes, gaunt aspen, the somber hues of lichens on weathered granite. The seasonal green is gone, and only the conifers preserve it with dark coolness, their branches pruned back by the weight of the snows. Winter is all of frozen beauty, Mother Nature hibernates; by the time of the equinox we tire and hope for the "spring" of life.

The pasqueflower symbolizes all that is missing in the wintry landscape, and should there come a spring without the regeneration it prefigures, the winter would have grown lethal. Wilderness without its flora would be only the bleak and conquering storm, and it is this florescence that the pasqueflower helps us to celebrate because it dares to bloom when the winter of which we have wearied is not yet gone. "Flowering" touches values so soon;

this biological phenomenon becomes a metaphor for all the striving toward fruition that characterizes the psychological, intellectual, cultural, and even the spiritual levels of life.

Flowering adds the splendor of art to our often rather more mean thoughts concerning the evolution of life, for the flowers in the jungle fit their bearers for survival and yet also reveal how life pushes toward a level of living beauty that exceeds all precedent in the non-flowering wilderness. We love the landscape, the sunset, the night sky; yet greatly exceeding the geophysical, mineralogical, and celestial ranges of beauty are those of the emergent structures of life, particularly as these come to their botanical apogee in the flowers of the higher plants, which so marvelously combine function and beauty, as though to mark life's reproduction with a special sign.

Other plants flower more simply, as with the hundred thousand aspen catkins that I passed with the thousands of pasqueflowers, but even these wind-pollinated flowers or the ferns and mosses, which do not properly flower at all, still bear reproductive structures that, when looked at more nearly, amply enrich the phenomenon of florescence. Flowering, whether great or small, is a many-splendored thing, circling round the pageant of life that perennially springs from the latent earth.

The brilliance of this pasqueflower has its simplest explanations in mechanisms for flowering so soon at the winter's end. It must have petals (or, as the botanists prefer, petallike sepals) large enough to attract the few insects that are out so early. The downy surface of transparent hairs on its palmate leaves and stem insulates and also, as do those of the pussy willows, allows a radiation heating to temperatures high enough for development, providing a miniature greenhouse effect. The same coat probably also protects the pasqueflower from unneeded radiation, although it needs much light and cannot grow in the shade, and the hairs help in its water economy.



The energy stored in its root system is drawn upon for its spring growth, and the hollow stem seems to permit its rapid growth and to allow both its bending before the wind and a turning of its floral head to face the spring sun. By the last adaptation it gains enough solar energy to keep the floral parts operating efficiently. Its sap has a low freezing point, and all its parts are soaked with an acrid irritant, which discourages foraging deer and elk. This rose has its poison thorns.

This is survival through winter, to be sure, but the pasqueflower helps me to glimpse something more, the skill of art superimposed on the science of survival. This is exuberance in the fundamental, etymological sense of being more than expectedly luxuriant. Does not such an encouraging beauty speak of that face of nature that overleaps the merest hanging on to life to bear the winds of the storm with vigorous, adorning beauty? Nor is it just the grand petals of delicate purple whorled about the yellow stamens and pistils, for the fingered involucre frames the flower so well, and the villous coat has a sheen that, seen backlighted by the sun, gives a lustrous aura to complement the gentle leafy green.

Butterflies drink its nectar, and if I first reduce them to their pollinating function, I notice soon after their winged beauty. The bees come too, and I must look more closely again, to find in their wing venation still further evidence of the art that emerges with the architecture of life. As when we strip the beauty from the melodies of birds in spring or from human romantic love, laying bare only biochemical reproductive functions, so too here, perhaps when the more is reduced to the less, we refuse to let life's production and rebirth become a window into life's spirited inventiveness. But when released so, what images indeed can the flower build in the mind!

The flower gave our race its first glimpses of paradise, in the Persian walled garden from which the term derives. Flowers hint of Eden to those who deeply appreciate them; but earth is a natural garden, not entirely, not in winter, but exuberantly enough in spring and summer that its flowering recalls how life persists with appealing grace through the besetting storm. In the legendary days of Noah, the Hebrews took the rainbow for a sign after the Flood that life would not ever be destroyed but would survive its tragedies in blessedness.

The pasqueflower, too, when it bursts forth with the breaking up of the raging winter, is such a reminder of life's survival, indeed of a prospering such that it hopes for paradise. After the flood, the winter, this earth will always come round again to its garden season, to bring us somehow nearer to its ultimate natural significance, even to the sacred character of life in its struggling beauty. We begin to see why it is so inalienable a right to be able to find in the dusty earth this draft of beauty.

The natural character that we now celebrate comes through even its scientific name, *Pulsatilla patens*. It is "shaken" (*pulsatus*) by the incessant winds, and of diminutive form (*-illa*), while yet "spreading broadly" (*patens*) its brandished petals. John Gerard wrote in his 1597 *Herbal* that the "passe floure is called commonly in Latine *Pulsatilla*." Botanists have often placed *Pulsatilla* in the genus *Anemone*, that genus going back to the Greek word for "windflower," but most prefer to separate it out owing to the tails of the achenes, which become so greatly elongated as it sows those villous seeds on the very winds that blast it. Those wisps rising over the prairie gave it another name—the prairie smoke.

The winds have carried it virtually around the north temperate world, for it is found in northern Europe, in the western two-thirds of North America, and in the Siberian Orient. Further, from some ancestral plant there have evolved several closely related species. *Pulsatilla* is everywhere a flower that comes on the heels of winter and is without peer in its own environment. No other flower is able so to endure the cold and, if need be, the dry, and to spread its petals forth so boldly from the plains through the montane and into the alpine. Its taxonomy, geography, and ecology all return us to its hardy capacity to prosper before the wind and the winter.

The popular name further employs this character, for its preventive grace has drawn it into association with Easter and the Passover, recalling in Christianity and Judaism alike the passing out of bondage, the passing by of death, and a release into freedom and newness of life. Gerard continues, "They floure for the most part about Easter, which hath mooved mee to name it *Pasque floure*." But long before, it was known in Old English as *passefloure* and in French as

passefleure, *passe* being but a half-translated form of Pasch, going back through the Greek *pascha* to the Hebrew *pesach*.

Whatever its antiquity, we might first think, that association has no natural basis; it is entirely fictional. But we later find connections that are so fundamental—biologically, psychologically, and even theologically—that we are hardly aware of them. It is no coincidence that Easter comes with the spring; the energies of Easter belong with the energies of spring. The vernal lily is more than an artificial symbol, it is a natural emblem of life springing up anew out of a wintry death, and so too with those other symbols of life's reproductive powers—lambs, eggs, rabbits, and even the ladies parading in their fetching dresses and bonnets—that sometimes seem so flippant beside the sobriety of the grave and the hope for more.

The death of Jesus was not incidentally at the Passover, and centuries later, the missionary church, moved by forces it did not wholly understand, superimposed its annual memorial of the new covenant onto the "pagan" rites of spring that preceded Christianity in Europe. Easter is from an Indo-European root for the East, the rising sun, and the beloved Teutonic goddess Eostre, whose holiday was celebrated at the equinox. By a related insight, hardly less profound or subliminal, the church matched its incarnation with the winter solstice and the pagan rejoicing that the sun would begin its return toward spring, this coinciding with the birth of a Savior.





Whatever meaning the conquering faith added did not so much replace as complement, enrich, and extend the primitive and universal impulse in us to celebrate the return of the warmth of spring and the resurgence of life that is given by these mysterious powers of the sun. The Hebrew Passover, also with its lambs and eggs, was earlier transposed from a "pagan" pastoral festival as a coming out of bondage in Egypt blended with a deliverance from the grip of winter.

Perhaps it may not be so fanciful but rather entirely realistic that this pasqueflower should in its limited and natural way come to serve as a symbol for what Jesus in his unlimited, supernatural way represents to the Christian mind, a hint of the release of life from the powers that would suppress it. The

pasqueflower is of a piece with the rose of Sharon, which blooms in the desert, and the shoot budding out of the stump of Jesse, for here we have an earthen gesture of the powers of resurgent life.

We have become too wise in our own conceits if ever we let a winter solstice go by without a glance upward to rejoice that the sun will sink no lower in the darkening sky, glad that the shadows will not lengthen, glad that the longest night is done. We have become too artificially cultured if ever we let a vernal equinox fail to bring hope in the spring it pledges, glad that there is more of the day than of the night, more of life and less of death. We walk too hurriedly if ever we pass the season's first pasqueflower by, too busy to let its meeting stay us for a quiet moment before this token of the

covenant of life to continue in beauty despite the storm. We come too sadly to the autumnal equinox if ever there comes a fall without its thanksgiving, making us glad for the harvest, which, remembering how there is in every root and seed a hope, makes us brave before the returning winter.

Flowers cover our every grave. But is that because they mask death for a moment, before they too fade, their comfort only an illusion adorning death? I think not. They belong there because they somehow betoken to us, at levels more subconscious than we know, this florescence of life, this capacity of the germ plasm to pass through death, to persist in transient beauty over the vortex of chaos.

In one of the earliest burials known to archeology, in the Shanidar cave in northern Iraq, there lay a man who was congenitally deformed, his bones amidst fossil pollen. His Neanderthal mourners had gathered grape hyacinths and bachelor's buttons, hollyhocks and golden ragwort, and covered him with a blanket of blossoms. They cared for this cripple in life, and then found at death no better symbol than a floral tribute to communicate their hope that life would envelop death.

Their passions at that grave almost make us weep, for they touch so anciently this hope for the "passing over" of death by life, a force that reaches on to the pagan Germanic Easter, on to the Semitic exodus out of winter and Egypt, on to Calvary, on to the medieval naming of the pasqueflower, and on to beset me now.

If the flower has for fifty thousand years served as an emblem of resolution in the face of death, then my thoughts run steady in a natural track as perennial as the springs since Neanderthal times. The flower is a very powerful symbol, it has had a psychologically elevating effect in every culture, and if anyone cares to say that this is not scientific, but romantic, that does not make it any less real. Our recent "flower children" knew this impact when they hung flowers in protest in the guns of destruction.

For longer than we can ever remember flowers have been flung up to argue against the forces of violence and death, because that is what they do in and of themselves, and thus they serve as so ready a sign for any who encounter them in a pensive mood, wearied of the winter, frightened by the storm, saddened by death. This is why it is liberating to find the pasque-

flower bearing with beauty the winds of March.

The beauties of winter are heartless, yet there is no deeper mystery than how life flowers because of the agonies that threaten it. Environmental pressures shape life—that is the premise of all biological science. Life is pressed by the storms, but it is pressed on by the storms, and environmental necessity is the mother of invention in life. The winter is a sinister maelstrom against which we fling out our curses, against which we fling up our flowers, yet is it chaos and otherness and nothing more? Or does it too belong in the seasonal economy, as night complements day, almost a sign of the unfathomable dialectic of life with its opposite?

Flowers arose against the adversities of the drought and the cold. We can only speculate about their origins, but it is axiomatic within evolutionary theory that the advanced flowers of the angiosperms conveyed some advantage, perhaps the exploitation of insects for better outbreeding, more experimentation for altered forms, such as the encased seed or the herbaceous habit, the better adapted against the dry or the cold. The seasonal tropical desert was perhaps more significant than the winter in the beginning, but each harshness has much in common, and the subsequent global advance of the angiosperms amply proved their effectiveness for overwintering.

The feat of flowering in the spring is a reciprocal of the defeat of the "fall," and the floral diversification of our temperate climates is very much a product of winters alternating with summers. This pasqueflower springs forth in its particular form of early beauty as much because of the winter as to spite it; it buds and blossoms because it is blasted. Without the wind, there would be no windflowers, and without the advancing of death, there is no advancing of life.

Modern man came out of the Ice Age. Perhaps as the human genetic stock was exposed to the pressures of glaciation, relaxed in the interglacial ages, like winters and summers, we were made modern in this recent flowering of Indo-European civilization. The north wind made not only the Vikings, it made us all. We do not owe every culture to the Pleistocene winter, for archaic civilizations arose in the tropics, but we owe all culture to the hostility of nature, provided only that we can keep in tension with this the support of nature that is truer still, the

one the warp, the other the woof, in the weaving of what we have become.

Beyond that, all who live where the pasqueflower flourishes will, when they have searched deeply, find how it was the cold that made our ancestors sew garments and build fires, how it made them fashion an ever more insulating culture, in which dress we proved able not only to survive but to flourish. Our human genus flowered before the winter, much as does this pasqueflower; and once again we find the arts in their beauty superimposed on the science of survival.

This pasqueflower endures the winter in noble beauty; but its suffering is not only the shadow of its beauty, it is among the roots that nourish it. That "suffering" is metaphorical for this insentient flower; still, this natural

character is an apt sign to be drawn into association with the passion of Easter and the Pesach. Life decomposes and out of its throes it recomposes; it persists in perpetual beauty while it is perpetually perishing.

The way of nature is, in this deep though earthen sense, the Way of the Cross. Light shines in the darkness that does not overcome it. This noble flower is a poignant sacrament of this, and to chance to find it in earliest spring, and to pause at that meeting, is to find a moment of truth, a moment of memory and promise. Let winters come, life will flower on as long as earth shall last.

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