Second Flowerings

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CHASE

Contents

Second Flowerings: Reimagining the Victorian Language of Flowers for Today

The idea that plants communicate has become accepted as scientific fact in recent years, while the nineteenth century saw the proliferation of an imaginative genre that centred around the concept of talking or communicative flowers. The language of flowers was a cultural fad and popular form that originated in France and became translated and Anglicised widely from 1834 onwards. Initially appealing to the love intrigues of the genteel lady, the books were founded on the concept of a covert method of communication between lovers through a 'vocabulary' of flowers that were assigned meanings or sentiments. Editors and compilers of the language of flowers related an origin story for the genre that took inspiration from the Turkish sélam, a mnemonic system (whereby various objects, flowers included, derived their meanings from a rhyming word), which was conveyed to Western readers in the eighteenth century through the writings of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Aubry de la Mottraye. In France particularly, an 'occult tradition' emerged within this apparently secretive system of communication. This is an offshoot discussed in detail by scholars Jack Goody and Brent Elliott, which included aspects of divination and Hermeticism. In the mainstream, as part of the gift book trade, the language of flowers books were in fact decorative ornaments, edited for decorum and respectability, intended for display, and as such they are often analysed now as a playful fantasy marketed primarily at female, middle-class readerships. The genre, despite these very specific associations, is a fascinating and entertaining foray into an aspect of nineteenth-century material culture, gender construction and human perceptions of nature. The representation of plant life, historical and current, moves to the forefront of this reimagining project as we consider the consequences of Western attitudes and impositions upon vegetal life.

The language of flowers was unique, and although floral symbolism has a history that predates the nineteenth century, the originality of this genre as a compiled and compact form ensured that it held wide appeal and was disseminated with ease. There are multiple expressions of platonic and familial love discussed and celebrated within these books, which take the genre beyond the remit of romance. Furthermore, an examination of the marginalia found within these now antique collectables reveals a tradition of female gifting and inheritance which broadens the sphere of this genre's relevance. The language of flowers also spoke to universal human concerns and life stages. As such, the books could be gifted as items of sympathy for the loss of a loved one, while floriography featured in the masonry of the graveyard to consecrate memory and memorial. The language of flowers genre therefore had wider uses and readerships than may at first be imagined, even eventually becoming associated with adolescents and children as the century progressed. Despite a clear separation from more earnest botanical works, the language of flowers could also contain Linnaean classification detail, and descriptive passages that would assist the reader in flower identification and the growing habits of flora. The genre's popularity ensured that the language of flowers blossomed across nineteenth-century cultural forms, indicating that the floriography of the flower 'vocabularies' became diffused and disseminated within the cultural imagination: from music, to needlework, to Valentines, to scrapbooking, to gravestones, to narrative fiction and art. It is through a consideration of artwork that our reimagining project intersects with the traditional Victorian language of flowers.

The language of flowers books usually retained a version of the 'vocabulary' to remain truly a 'language of flowers' contribution, but to varying degrees they privileged contents that included poetry, personal anecdotes, folklore, biblical messages and beautifully illustrated 'plates'. In the early publications particularly, draughtsmen or botanical illustrators provided the images for these works, depicting meaningful bouquets or individual flowers and their assigned sentiment. The artistic temperament of the language of flowers publications was often foregrounded, with titles such as Flora Symbolica; or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers with Coloured Illustrations (John Ingram, 1869), The Coloured Language of Flowers (Mrs. L. Burke, 1886), and The Artistic Language of Flowers (Anon., c. 1888/1890). Artistic representation was a formative aspect of a genre that invested much in appearances and affect, and this embellishment to the language of flowers persisted throughout the century.

The cross-cultural translation and longevity of the language of flowers, from the early nineteenth-century through to the dawn of the twentieth, reveals that it endured and adapted until fading away with the advent of World War One. There are numerous scholars who have considered the foibles and failings of the language of flowers that to some degree account for this decline. Some suggest re-prioritisations following the ravages of war and modernist proclivities that did not look back on the nineteenth century or its associated tradition of sentimentality favourably. Broadly, the main criticisms of the genre suggest that:

- The books have been perceived as commodifying emotion, sentiment and feeling through their position within the gift book trade and mass market appeal.
- The unstable or seemingly arbitrary meanings ascribed to flowers implies that the language of flowers was not concerned with the 'real lives' of plants.
- The language of flowers evidences a demeaning personification of plant life, and the instrumentalisation of plants for human use. Colonial practices saw the inclusion of 'exotic' or 'foreign' plants within the vocabularies, as the books were adapted to consumerist tastes and trends.
- There is scant evidence that the language of flowers had any real application to everyday lives, functioning primarily as a romantic fantasy, an accomplishment, an amusement, and a parlour game.

Frontispiece in Elizabeth Steele Perkins, Flora's Fancy Fete; or, Floral Characteristics, a Poem Illustrative of the Language and Sentiment of Flowers (Brighton: W. H. Mason, 1839). Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.169364>.

- The tone and content of these books function to reinscribe gender and class stereotypes, through didacticism concerning the middle or upper-class woman and her role in society within the culture of femininity.
- In one respect, the language of flowers demonstrates xenophobia through the explicit editing of the books for different national markets, as well as cultural appropriation in the re-figuring of the sélam. There is an odd merging of fascination with, and appreciation of, an 'Oriental' or Turkish language of flowers combined with clear distancing from this idea for Western markets.

The language of flowers, then, in its Western iterations, was inextricable from many of the criticisms that haunt the nineteenth century concerning colonial expansion, imperial attitudes and cultural appropriation. These criticisms have also been seen as generative of long-lasting climate-based repercussions. Why, then, revisit a genre apparently so readily critiqued and harbouring many prejudices and biases that are not concurrent with contemporary attitudes and concerns? One reason might be that despite the flaws and anthropocentric projections within the language of flowers, the very idea that plants express or have feeling can be determined an inspirational and progressive standpoint in the nineteenth century. An emphasis on establishing connection and mutual sympathy with the natural world is suggested by Charlotte de Latour (alias Louise Cortambert) in her formative publication. By exploring and engaging with criticisms of the language of flowers, this artistic project of juxtapositions can reveal ways forward, interconnections and new directions. Inspired by the words of Professor Ann Shteir during the Language of Flowers Virtual Symposium of 2021, given the 'peril and loss in the biome', potentials around 'plant communication, plant intelligence and sentience', this project explores what the language of flowers can still offer us, or how it might engender new environmental perspectives today.

A democratisation of Victorian language of flowers publications has taken place through the open access digitisation projects of the Biodiversity Heritage Library and the Internet Archive, ensuring the widespread availability of books once only accessible to the wealthier groups of society. Our artistic remediation project, converting these decorative items of material culture into the online image, the zine format, positioning illustration alongside photographic media, attempts to build upon the ideas behind open access, interdisciplinarity and the dissemination of scholarship.

The CHASE Climate Justice Network has generously funded 'Second Flowerings', which casts both a critical and appreciative eye on the language of flowers. The project intends to revisit the cultural phenomenon that enchanted so many during the nineteenth century, while sowing the seeds of further imaginative growth. We have not revised or reissued the nineteenth century vocabulary and sentiments for contemporary artworks, allowing the artists, their topics and the plants to convey their own message. Equally, we wish to foreground some of the more unusual aspects of the language of flowers: the genre included a range of vegetal life, with many surprising entries that encompass gymnosperms, trees, fruits, poisonous plants, grains, insectivorous plants and vegetables. In line with the climate justice imperative of the project, considerations of biodiversity loss, extractivism, and the use of plants in food and medicine are highlighted through the chosen examples of vegetal art.

— Jemma Stewart

James Andrews, Plate XII, ‘Mignonette, Heliotrope, Pink, Your qualities surpass your charms; I love you with a pure and devoted love’, in Robert Tyas, The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora, 2nd edn (London: R. Tyas, 1841), p. 283. 1st edn 1836.

Thinking with Flowers

At the beginning this project, Jemma would send me pdf upon pdf of intricately illustrated, worn-out publications: Language of Flowers, Floral Emblems, The Sentiment of Flowers, they speak of melancholy (weeping willow), thoughtlessness (the almond tree) and tender recollections (the periwinkle). Their encyclopaedic scope demonstrates an attempt to produce an encompassing and systematic language through flowers.

The artists in this volume, Abdessamad El Montassir, Guy Ronen, Noara Quintana, Samir Laghouati Rashwan and Vasundhara Mathur speak of, or through, flowers too, of memory, land, mythology, extraction and preservation. While no attempt is made to produce a systematised language of flowers in placing these artworks together, we can nonetheless say that the sentiments that emerge in these contemporary works are far less whimsical.

Here plants speak for unspoken atrocities, as is the case of the Cactus in Abdessamad El Montassir's short film Galb'Echaouf. They speak of ecoviolence in the case of the Eucalyptus in Guy Ronen's Experiments in Lignifying. They are emblematic of extractive colonial projects, the Victoria regia in Noara Quintana's Evening of Water or Quinine in Samir Laghouati Rashwan's Kinakina. They mark, memorialise, and transmit sensory information; Vasundhara Mathur's grandfather, Ravi Krishna, sends her an intricate explanation of how to press flowers as part of her Pressing Flowers. Dried and pressed they might be preserved for years on end.

Where the language of flowers publications make proxies of vegetal life, a semi-covert means by which humans might communicate with one another through floral signifiers, these projects take seriously the idea that the flowers themselves might have something to tell us.

This project draws on and is indebted to the work of artists including Joy Gregory who has been rewriting a Language of Flowers in cyanotype since 1992 and Maria Thereza Alves, whose project Seeds of Change first brought me to the idea of thinking plants and seeds as 'silent witnesses' to global histories.

— Jess Saxby

Abdessamad El Montassir

Galb'Echaouf, 2020

Cactus

Daghmous

Cactaceae

Cactus opuntia

Carnegiea gigantean

Echinocereus stramineus

Burn

Horror

Myosotis

Forget-Me-Not

Scorpion grass

Abdessamad El Montassir, Galb'Echaouf, 2020

What if the desert could speak when words fail? Where trauma has not fallen through the cracks of time but into the void of unspeakability. An atrocity took place in the Sahara, it remains unnamed, that is the point. And while It might be unnamed, it might never be discussed, its aftershock continues to shape lives. Abdessamad El Montassir probes at its existence, seeking ways of describing it without words. When archives are insufficient, we often turn to oral histories, but in the impossibility of oral history we might turn to the land.

The land bears traces of all kinds of histories, the eerie emerald lakes of abandoned mines, the toxic soils that lay in the wake of plantations and energy plants, fields of graves and of petrified bones and bitumen. Amid the scars and the fossils, the land also plays host to other non-human forms: the insects, animals, plants, seeds, flowers and trees that might also enter into what Shela Sheikh calls an 'articulate collective' which might be called upon to bear witness to the historic past. Where 'plants are not just the passive backdrop against which historical events take place, but rather they figure as "dynamic agents."'[1]

El Montassir's short film Galb'Echaouf takes place in the Western Sahara. A sparse and speculative narrative — supplemented and nourished by the desert cactus, old enough to have seen it all — tentatively fills the silences left by the human populations there.

The land is no longer simply landscape, its role as a dynamic agent is that of witness. While many people left the desert during the 1970s, the plants never left. The artist interviews the mother of one of his friends: "the land witnessed many atrocities which I cannot describe," she says. "Go and ask the ruins, the desert, its thorny plants. They saw and lived through everything and have remained there." The rootedness of the plant, which for a long time condemned it to judgements of inertness, becomes its very capacity for recording memory.

— Jess Saxby

[1] Shela Sheikh, Conversing with Leaves, 2020

Cactus ❧ I burn

Common Cactus, Or Indian Fig — Cactus Opuntia

“Traino, I burn, I pine, I perish, Tranio, If I achieve not this young modest girl”
— Shakespeare

The spines of this singular cactus, are nearly as troublesome to extricate from the skin, as the flames of Cupid are to extinguish in the heart.

‘Common Cactus’, in Henry Phillips, Floral Emblems (London: Saunders & Otley, 1825), p. 174. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.42446>.

‘Cactus’, by J. J. Grandville, in Taxile Delord, Les Fleurs Animées (Paris: Gabriel de Gonet, 1847), p. 4. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Research Library, The Getty Research Institute (archive.org) <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.82440>.

The Forget ❧ me ❧ Not

Not on the mountain’s shelving side
Nor in the cultivated ground
Nor in the garden’s painted pride,
The flower I seek is found.

Where Time on sorrow’s page of gloom
Has fixed its envious lot,
Or swept the record from the tomb,
It says, Forget me not.

And this is still the loveliest flower,
The fairest of the fair,
Of all that deck my lady’s bower,
Or bind her floating hair.

‘The Forget-Me-Not’, in Anon., The Language and Poetry of Flowers with Floral Illuminations (London: Marcus Ward & Co., 1881), p. 123. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160205>

‘Forget me not’, in Anon., The Language of Flowers (London: Ernest Nister, 1890).

Following pages:
Screenshots from Abdessamad El Montassir, Galb'Echaouf, 2020
'Forget-me-not: Remembrance', in Anon., The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems (London: T. Nelson & Sons, Paternoster Row, 1858), p. 20. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Cornell University Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160183>.


Several silent beings like Dah
live here,
and as if buried secrets
were hidden,
Everything turned to ashes.


Forget-me-not
Remembrance

Guy Ronen

Experiments in Lignifying

Eucalyptus

Eucalyptus camaldulensis

Oak

Quercus

Lepidobalanus

Hospitality

Majesty

Strength

Shelter

Acacia

Robinia pseudacacia

Platonic Love

Chaste Love


okay it's it's eucalyptus

Guy Ronen, Experiments in Lignifying, 2021

At the threshold of Zionist renewal and trauma, Palestinian displacement, naturalisation of bodies as to an imposed natural status and commercial genetic modifications, lies the eucalyptus.

Arriving at Israel/Palestine at the 19th century as part of a British colonial trade, embraced at first by Zionist officials as a biotechnological weapon against Malaria, then turning into a tool for displacement as part of the eco-violence applied against Palestinian communities, whilst rewriting Zionist imagination as a site for collective trauma and the production of the New Jew. Recently it was reproduced again in the labs of the Israeli company Futuragene as the first ever genetically modified plant to be commercially planted in Brazil. The eucalyptus has become a site of contradicting pasts and futures.

A speculative look into the modification of different bodies at the production of nature, our eucalyptus body consists so far of a short queer science-fiction myth, Experiments in Lignifying, a sound piece called left over swamp and a video, eucalyptus cell, gently modified.

— Guy Ronen

Oak, Hospitality

"And the oak, king of Britannia's woods,
And guardian of her isle."

Dodsley

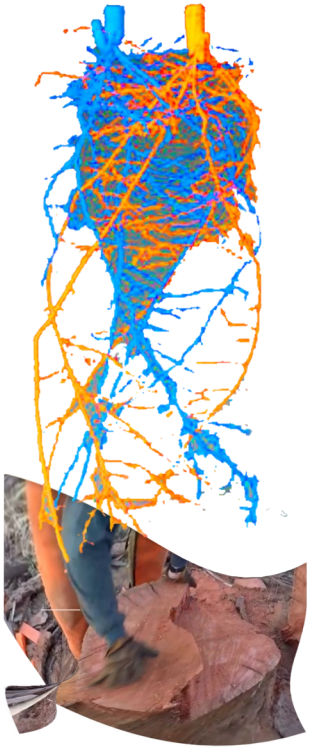
"The Oak, the king of forests all," was considered the most sacred of all trees by the chief nations of antiquity, and its existence deemed coeval with the earth's. No faith but appears to have associated its rites with this symbol of majesty and strength. Biblical lore abounds with allusions to this "tower of strength." It was "under the oak which was by Shechem," that Jacob buried the strange gods and ornaments of his household. Under the "oak of weeping" Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, was interred. The Lord's messenger that appeared to Gideon "sat under an oak;" and it was by the branches of one of these trees that Absalom, David's beloved but rebellious son, was caught, and met with death. "The oaks of Bashan," that mystic land where dwelt the mighty King Og and his gigantic followers, are called to mind, together with numerous other allusions to the hospitable tree — to that tree which many ancient races believed to have afforded shelter to the very first human beings.

Text: John Ingram, Flora Symbolica; or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1869), p. 313. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.159895>.

Image: 'Oak', in Mrs L. Burke, The Coloured Language of Flowers (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1886), p. 62. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.156602>.

Following pages:
Experiments in Lignifying, Guy Ronen, 2020
'Acacia', in Henry Gardiner Adams, Oriental Text Book and Language of Flowers (London: Dean & Son., 1850), p. 31. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.158510>.

a eucalyptus root (pronouns they/them) -



They have been lost for a while, paving their way through soil they have never felt comfortable within. Misplaced and out of place, their adolescence was an ongoing attempt to break their own ceiling, ceiling their nostalgia for a land they'll never recognize its taste. Dwelling in the leach of nutrients for long enough, enough was redefined according to trauma transcribed as muscle memory. Having to learn only how to keep on further, down in dark corners, down in composed layers they haven't comprehend. Now intoxicated by the soil of rich, the shallow became their kingdom whilst the height became in reach.

So they crawl to all sides, at once and apart, parting their linear growth between other systems they have gotten to touch. They've lasted the most around cold surfaces, lusting for surfing on covered temptations, sensing them scorching within without needing to risk confronting the heat. Erotic asphyxiation practiced through a non-consensual penetration of foundations. Once their grope of a sewage pipe rolled into a groppel so fiercely, it opened up the only long relationship they've come to know. Since then, they have been attempting to speak, locate their desire before it'll drip into another kind of pipe.

The Acacia ❀ Platonic Love

"It is a gentle and affectionate thought
That, in immeasurable heights above us,
At our first birth the wreath of love was woven,
With sparkling stars for flowers."

— Coleridge

"Love, the last best gift of heaven;
Love, gentle, holy, pure."

— Keble

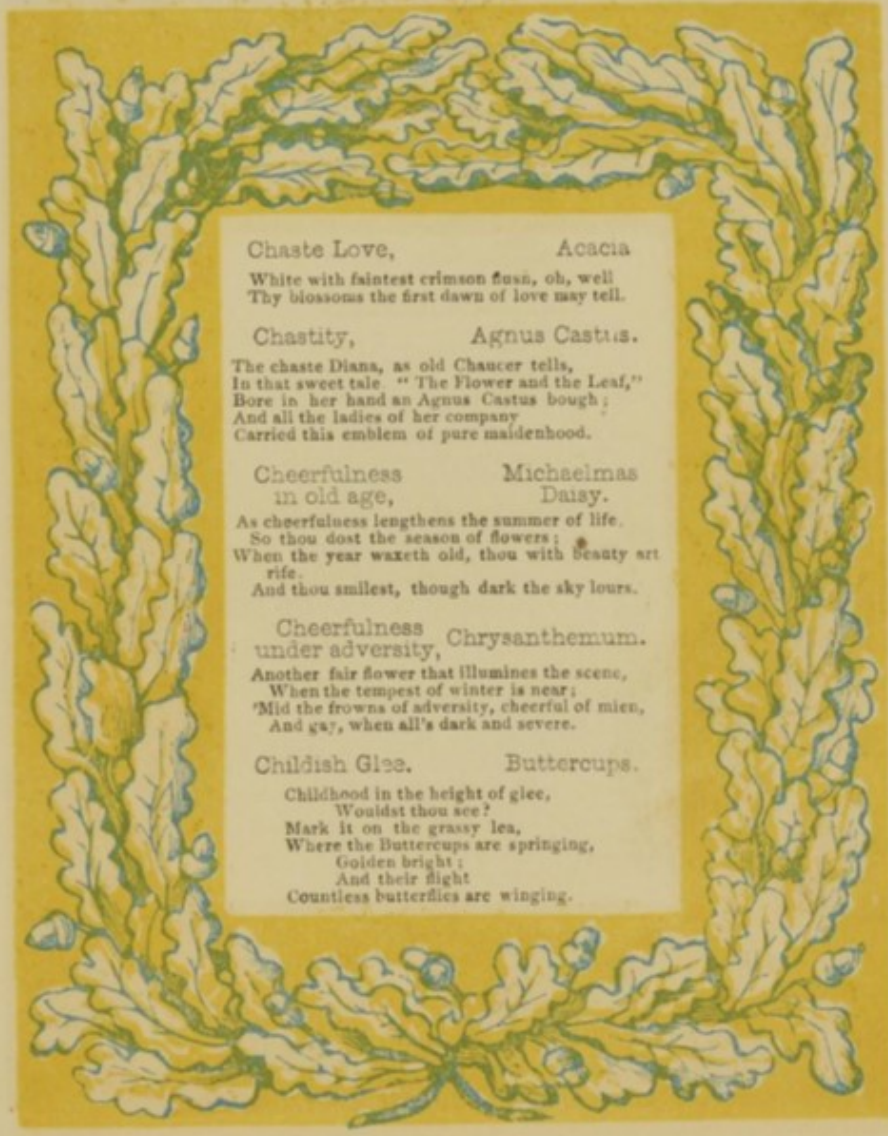
That holy and pure affection, of which a flowering branchlet of the Acacia is emblematical, has surely a heavenly original. Beauty attracts; but if unaccompanied by those endowments of mind and heart which are truly worthy of esteem, it fails to exercise a lasting power over any who are seeking for them, and who possess the discernment which marks their absence; on the other hand, where genuineness of character exists, where amiability, considerateness, and purity of heart and mind are found — though the casket which contains them may be of the plainest, and repulsive rather than attractive — the influence of these characteristics will generate in the mind of the observer that kind of esteem which, growing into admiring regard, at length ripens into the purest affection. Of such a sentiment as this, we are told, the modest aboriginal native youths of America, when they have formed a feeling of the highest delicacy, which they cannot express in words make the Acacia their token in representing their regards to the fair maiden of their choice, — the maiden, fair to them as the fairest of England's daughters to the youth of our sea-girt isle,— and she, not less sensible of the homage than the accomplished belles of our saloons, receives it with the blushful ingenuousness of the pure maiden lands.

The timber of the Acacia is highly valued in North America. It is close-grained, of great hardness, and is finely veined, and thus commands the preference of the cabinet-maker before all native trees. It is very incorruptible,— a striking quality of the purest love,— so much so, that gate-posts in use at Baltimore retained their freshness for nearly a hundred years. It has also great density and toughness, so that we are not surprised to be told that the American Indians use it for bows, as we do the yew; it is stated that their arrows are tipped with its thorns.

The generic name Robinia was given to the Acacia in honour of Jean Robin, herbalist to Henri Quatre. The son, who held an appointment at the Jardin de Roi, was the first who cultivated the R. Pseudacacia in Europe, where it was introduced in 1640.

The Acacia is a great ornament of our shrubberies in the spring, which pleasant season it seems to prolong by spreading its light shade over our groves, enlivening them with the fresh greennesss of its fine pinnated leaves, and beautifying them with its white pendulous and ororiferous flowers.

Robert Tyas, The Language of Flowers; or, Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings and Sentiments (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1869), pp. 1-3. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.7581>.



Chaste Love, — Acacia

White with faintest crimson flush, oh, well
Thy blossoms the first dawn of love may tell.

Chastity, — Agnus Castus.

The chaste Diana, as old Chaucer tells,
In that sweet tale "The Flower and the Leaf,"
Bore in her hand an Agnus Castus bough;
And all the ladies of her company
Carried this emblem of pure maidenhood.

Cheerfulness in old age, — Michaelmas Daisy.

As cheerfulness lengthens the summer of life,
So thou dost the season of flowers;
When the year waxeth old, thou with beauty art rife,
And thou smilest, though dark the sky lours.

Cheerfulness under adversity, — Chrysanthemum.

Another fair flower that illumines the scene,
When the tempest of winter is near;
'Mid the frowns of adversity, cheerful of mien,
And gay, when all's dark and severe.

Childish Glee. — Buttercups.

Childhood in the height of glee,
Wouldst thou see?
Mark it on the grassy lea,
Where the Buttercups are springing,
Golden bright;
And their flight
Countless butterflies are winging.

Noara Quintana

Evening of Water 2021

Victoria amazonica

Vitória-régia

Irupé

Uapé

Queen of the Lakes

White Water Lily

Nymphae alba

Nymphae coeurulea

Nymphae odorata

Nymphae gigantica

Mystery

Sanctity

Noara Quintana, Noites d'Agua, Evening of Water, 2021

The plant known in Brazil as Vitória-Régia (Victoria Amazonica), so named due to Queen Victoria of England, also known as Irupé (Guarani), Uapé (Tupi), or Queen of the Lakes, is uniquely situated within the flux of colonial histories, cultural appropriations and impositions that arose from the exploitation of rubber in 19th century Brazil. In Tupi legend, Uapé was born through the night time seduction of a young girl, Naiá, by the moon. When Naiá saw the object of her love reflected in the waters of a lake, she believed that there was a path to her beloved. Entering the dark waters, she surrendered her life to this encounter and to the profound depth of the illusion. In an act of compassion, the Moon God rendered Naiá eternal the following night, transforming her into a brilliant white flower made complete by the majestic floating lily that supports her form.

Conceived as a night time installation, the work gestures to the transformation that occurs to the Vitória-Régia's flower, which only blooms once the sun has set. Initially white and of female gender, the flower submerges itself, to be reborn as pink and masculine the following night.
In the 19th century, Vitória-Régia was transported to London's Kew Gardens, the same botanical garden where the smuggled seeds of the havea brasilinesis rubber tree were first germinated. At Kew, gardener and architect Joseph Paxton immersed himself in a profound research of the floating lily's structure of support. Inspired by this study, he designed London's Crystal Palace in 1851 — a technologically innovative landmark of modern architecture — by replicating in metal and glass the functionality of the ribbed structure of the Vitória-Régia and its relationship with the water's surface. The work 'Evenings of Water', conceived for Pivo, enacts this dialogue: latex buoyant on the waters of glass, a petal, resplendent on ribbed-metal.

The White Water Lily

As emblematic of mystery and of sanctity, the Lotus enters largely into the symbol worship of the East, and from earliest times has been an object, not only of reverence, but of actual adoration. The Egyptians cultivated three species of water lily: the nelumbium speciosum, whose flowers are of a lovely roseate colour; the nymphae coerulea, a blue lotus; and the nymphaea, a white lotus, which last still grows in great profusion in Lower Egypt. This is the rose of ancient Egypt, the "bride of the Nile," so called because if covers the bosom of the mighty river as it rises with its fragrant spotless blossoms. To the moon-goddess, Isis, "mother of the myriad names," perhaps because it seems to reflect her pure face in the waters, this lovely child of the stream was dedicated. According to a Greek legend, probably of Egyptian origin, the nymphaea was named after a beautiful nymph of this name, who, deserted by Alcides and unable to support her misery, slipt into the river and was drowned. The White Water Lily — nymphaea alba — which closely resembles the above, is our only British species, and is, without a doubt, the most magnificent of all our native flowers. This majestic river queen is the daughter of the light. Only to the sun will she reveal the full beauty of her pure, proud face; as darkness falls she veils her charms:

"Folds all her sweetness up / And slips into the bosom of the lake."

The Germans fable that the Undinen, or water nymphs, often conceal themselves from mortal gaze under the form of a nymphaea, when, as "lilies peerless in white chaste array," they dance upon the waters. Under the broad leaves hides the jealous Nix, or water sprite, hence great danger attends the gathering of die Seerosen.

A wonderful water lily — nymphaea gigantica — is found in North Australia, and a charming North American native is the nymphaea odorata, the white blooms of which, sometimes pink tinged, are deliciously sweet scented. But the largest and most magnificent of all the lotus tribe is the Victoria regia. It is a native of South America, and was first discovered the year 1825. It was not, however, until 1837 that public attention was first drawn to this regal flower, through Sir R. H. Schoenburg, by whom it was found growing in splendid profusion in the River Bernice (sic) in British Guiana. Unlike her sister lilies, this stately queen of the waters shrinks from the ardent embrace of the sun, and only under cover of night unfolds to the moon her sweetly flowering face.

Owing, doubtless, to the handsome form of the nymphaea, this sculpture-like lily was early chosen as a heraldic flower. The Frisians carried seven Schwanenblumen Blätter, or "swan flower leaves," on their shield, and in the

Previous pages:
Noara Quintana, Evening of Water, 2021
'Pink, Fuchsia, Water Lily, Malon Creeana', by Charles Terry, in Laura Valentine, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers with Floral Records and Selected Poetry and Original Illustrations Printed in Colours (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1867), p. 82. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/t.175398>.

Opposite:
'Emblematical Leaves for Each Day of the Week', in Henry Phillips, Floral Emblems (London: Saunders & Otley, 1825), p. 28. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.7040>.

"Gudrun Sage" we read that the azure standard borne before King Herwic, when marching to the rescue of his captive betrothed, was emblazoned with water lily leaves. In the East flower badges have long been used as emblems of secret societies, and in the beginning of the present century the Celestial Empire was widely disturbed by a league which went under the name of "The White Water Lotus." In Japan the white lotus is the emblem of purity, because it is not sullied by the mud of the waters on which it floats. Along with the flowers of the mother-wort — leonurus — it is carried before the dead at funerals. A pretty Indian fable tells how the duck, seeking the nymphaea during the night, perceives the stars as in a mirror reflected in the lake, and when day arrives and the white flowers open, mistaking them for these luminaries refrains from touching them. The collar of the Order of the Star of India is composed of a rose, two palm branches crossed, and a lotus flower. The lotus is the elegant symbol in art of the East in general. Christian artists, too, have sanctioned the lotus, sometimes substituting it for the white lily, as when seen in the hand of the Virgin Mary. The Wallachians have a pretty belief that every flower has a soul. The white water lily, sinless and scentless, blossoms upon the sacred lakelet at the gates of Paradise, to judge the other flowers, and will strictly inquire of them what they have done with their odours.

"The summer south wind breathes with gentle sigh
And parts the reeds, unveiling as they bend
A water lily floating on the wave".

— Graham

Text: 'The White Water Lily', in Lizzie Deas, Flower Favourites: Their Legends, Symbolism and Significance (London: George Allen, 1898), pp. 221-24.

opposite page:
Noara Quintana, Evening of Water, 2021. Installation view Savvy Berlin ”FOR THE PHOENIX TO FIND ITS FORM IN US. ON RESTITUTION, REHABILITATION, AND REPARATION”

Samir Laghouati Rashwan

Kinakina, 2021

Quinine

Quinquina

Quina-quina

Cinchona officinalis

Jesuit’s bark

loxa bark

Holy bark

White Rose

Silence

Wheat

Corn

Riches

Samir Laghouati Rashwan, Kinakina 2021

‘Just look at the names they gave us!

Cinchona Officinalis

That’s what you’re calling yourself?

I don’t think so, you know, where I’m from, we don’t have one name, but a whole bunch of names according to the season, our age, or in our case the specific place we come from’

— Kinakina 2022 (work in progress)

Working backwards from gin and tonic you eventually end up at the Cinchona officinalis, first imported to Europe from Peru by Spanish Jesuits in the 17th century, it ends up in colonial trial gardens in Paris and in London, and famously in the cocktails of the British colonies.

Samir Laghouati Rashwan’s work-in-progress film Kinakina loosely dances around the idea of restituting knowledge to the plants from whom this knowledge was violently extracted. It stars two Quinine plants and a Schweppes bottle. Trees, plants, grains and soil are hot topics, existential panic is rising in the face of a climate crisis, and this artwork sees two Quinine plants engaged in a gentle mocking of a renewed interest in their existence. The plants are ventriloquized yet their conversation remains opaque. Uprooted and renamed there is much that has been lost in the folds of the ongoing colonial encounter. Nonetheless it is through these plants that a colonial history can be told.

The quinine plant was considered a ‘present offered by divine providence’ (op. cit Samir Boumediene La Colonisation du Savoir) on account of its healing powers and it is this fetishisation that saw it shipped around the world and coveted.

— Jess Saxby

White Rose, Silence

The god of silence was represented under the form of a young man, with one finger placed on his lips, and holding a white rose in the other hand. We are told that Love gave him this rose to secure his favour. The ancients sculptured a rose over the doors of their festive halls to interdict the guests from repeating anything that was spoken. Byron has rendered it sacred to the silence of the tomb. In the “Bride of Abydos,” he says, that o’er the tomb of Zuleika

A single rose is shedding
Its lovely lustre, meek and pale:
It looks as planted by despair
So white, so faint, the slighest gale
Might whirl the leaves on high.

Previous pages:
Samir Laghouati Rashwan, Kinakina, 2021

Text: Robert Tyas, The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora, 2nd edn (London: R. Tyas, 1841), p. 253. 1st edn 1836. Illustrated by James Andrews. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.169373>.

Image: '1. Lobelie Cardinale, 2. Trèfle 3. Oeillet d'Inde 4. Noisette 5. Thym 6. Rose Blanche', in Casimir Magnat, Traite´du Langage Symbolique, Emblematique et Religieux des Fleurs (Paris: A. Touzet, [1855?]), p. 382. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Cornell University Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.159885>.


Do you know why everyone is so interested in us at the moment?
Always creating categories,
classifications,
all we ever asked for was to be left alone to live
Cinchona Officinalis
That's what you're calling yourself?
C - POPULATION - MAIN
Le Cercle de
d'Ivoire. Les dernier
240.000 habitants.
Ils appartie
qualités particulière
vriers agricoles.
Cette région
Main-d'oeuvre et nomb
venant compléter leur
Pour les pla
ement ne se pose
inférieurs à ceu
de personnel.
VOIES DE COMMUNICA

Corn Riches

Corn is a term applied to all sorts of grain fit for food, particularly wheat, barley, oats, and rye. All of them belong to the grand division of grasses, which are distinguished from other plants by their simple, straight, unbranched stalk, hollow, and jointed, commonly called straw; with long, narrow, tapering leaves, placed at each joint of the stalk, and sheathing and enclosing it, as if by way of support.

Ceres, the goddess of corn and harvest, was represented with a garland of ears of corn on her head. The commemoration of the loss of her daughter Proserpine was celebrated about the beginning of harvest; that of her search after her at the time of sowing corn.

Botanists assure us that corn is not found any where in its primitive state. This plant, together with the use of fire, seems to have been bestowed by Providence on man, in order to secure him the dominion of the earth. With corn and fire, he may dispense with all other gifts, or rather, he may acquire them all. With corn alone he can feed all the domestic animals, which furnish him with subsistence or share his labours. Corn is the first bond of society, because its culture and preparation demand hard labour and mutual services.

Text: 'Corn. Riches.', in The Language of Flowers; with Illustrative Poetry, ed. by Frederic Shoberl, 3rd edn (London: Saunders & Otley, 1835), pp. 165-66.

Image opposite: 'August: As a symbol of this month we weave a wreath of wheat, barley, and oats, encircling a branch of purple plums'.
'July, August and September', in Henry Phillips, Floral Emblems (London: Saunders & Otley, 1825), pp. 44-8. Available from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.7040>.

Floral Emblems.

Vasundhara Mathur

Ravi Krishna

Pressing flowers

Marigold

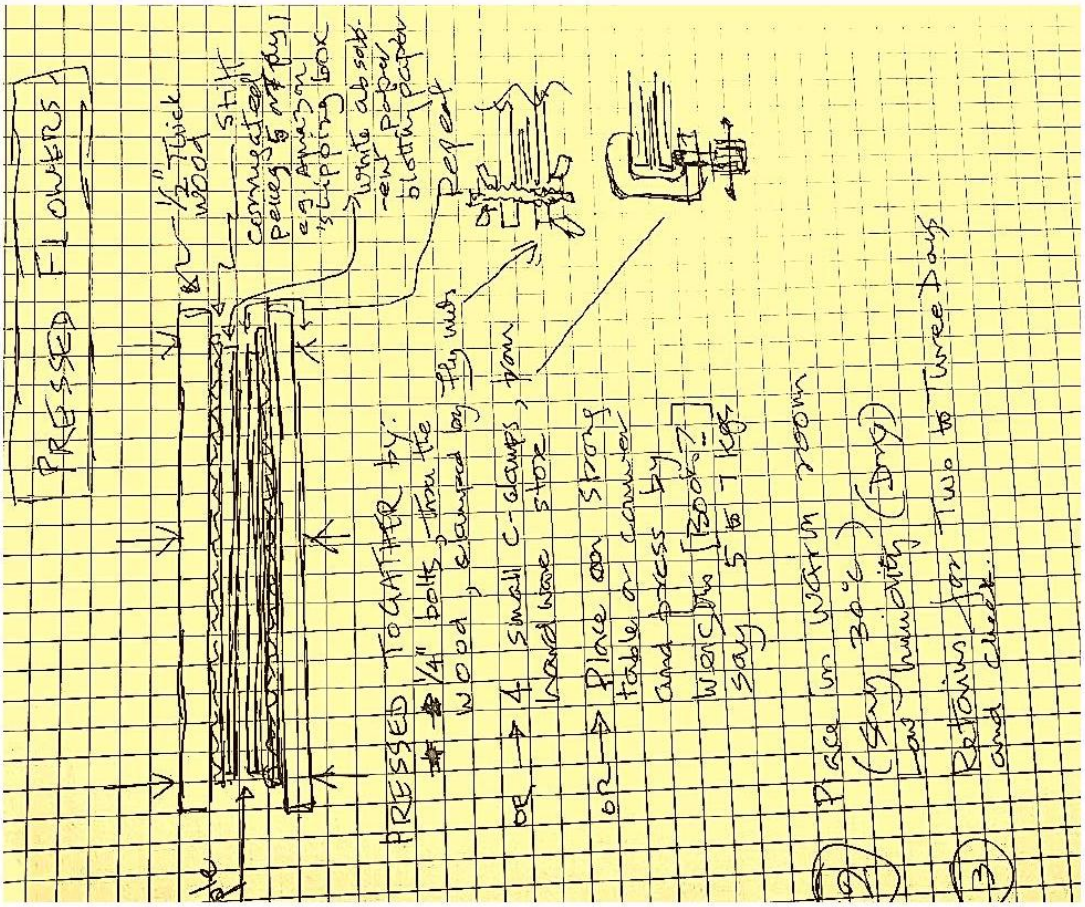
Garden souci

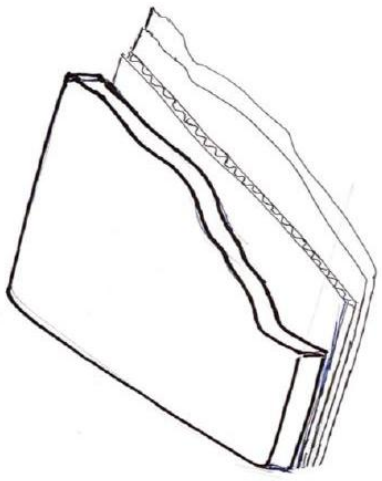
Tagetes erecta

Grief

Summer

Melancholy





Vasundhara Mathur, Pressing Flowers, 2021

Marygold, or Garden Souci ⁘ Grief

I once saw, in a rich gallery of paintings, a pretty miniature by Madame Lebrun. This charming artist had represented grief under the form of a young man, pale and languishing, whose reclining head seemed bowed down with the weight of a wreath of souci. Every body is familiar with this gilded flower, which is a conventional emblem of distress of mind. It is distinguished by many singular properties. It blossoms the whole year; and, on that account, the Romans termed it the flower of the calends; in other words, of all the months. Its flowers are only open from nine in the morning till three in the afternoon. They, however, always turn towards the sun, and follow his course from east to west.

'Marygold, or Garden Souci', in Anon., The Language of Fowers (London: Saunders & Otley, 1834), p. 94.

'Your anger causes me pain, your friendship
and love are an everlasting pleasure. Emblems: anger — gorse; pain, or grief — marigold; friendship — acacia; everlasting pleasure — sweet pea'.

Image: James Andrews, in Thomas Miller, The Poetical Language of Flowers; or, The Pilgrimage of Love, 2nd edn (London: David Bogue, 1855), p. 132. 1st edn 1847
Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Cornell University Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160196>.

Many of us have, laid up in some hidden spot, dried specimens of one flower or another, which was gathered by, or presented to us at a time of unusual happiness, or on an occasion of intense grief. These dried specimens are now and then looked upon, and they take us back into the past, and they help us in a remarkable degree to revive all the little incidents, pleasant or painful, connected with the time when we first became possessed of them.

'Pressed flowers', in Robert Tyas, The Language of Flowers; or, Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings and Sentiments (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1869), p. vi.

opposite page:
Vasundhara Mathur, Pressing Flowers 2021

Pressing flowers into hands
Pressing them deep
into the folds till petals crumple
and release the scent of rain
translucent, her dupatta wafting
behind her and I, young and bouncing
~~grabbing for her grannys~~ cleach the flowers
till they are absorbed

this method is machinery; so a machine
for pressing is constructed.
this ~~way~~ way makes memory real
an archive of flowers
~~[illegible]~~
minus one dimension
Place in a warm room,
low humidity, on strong table or counter
and press

Opposite:
‘1. Scabieuse_2. Geranium Rosa_3. Souci_4. Rue_5. Syringa_6. Serpolet’, in Casimir Magnat, Traité du Langage Symbolique, Emblématique et Religieux des Fleurs (Paris: A. Touzet, 1855?), p. 464. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Cornell University Library <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.159885>.


LANGAGE DES FLEURS DE Mr L'ABBÉ MAGNAT
1
2
3
4
5
6
1. Scabieuse — 2. Geranium rosa — 3. Souci — 4. Rue — 5. Syringa — 6. Serpolet.

Thank you to

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CHASE climate justice network

Further Reading

Many digitised language of flowers publications can be accessed through an online collection from the Biodiversity Heritage Library <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/browse/collection/LanguageofFlowers>.

Selected studies

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Shteir, Ann, Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760 to 1860 (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Shteir, Ann, 'Speaking with Flora', at The Language of Flowers Virtual Symposium, the Chicago Botanic Garden's Lenhardt Library and the Caxton Club, held on Friday, April 30, 2021.

Siegel, Leora, 'Language of Flowers: 19th Century Literary Genre Offered Opportunities for Women Writers of Natural History', 30 March 2019 <https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2019/03/language-of-flowers.html#more-22153>.