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TAP Art Space

A Garden, A Lamb & A Pearl  
By Marie Ségolène C. Brault

Wasps die in this room, nearly every second day. They get stuck between the windows and can't find their way out. When they feel it coming their wings get louder – faster and louder. One fell by my foot a few seconds ago. I imagine one of the last things it saw was the Quaking Aspen, peaking right above the treeline. Its leaves waving back and forth like some kind of dance.

There are tens of thousands of types of wasps, many of which are still unknown to man, spread out in every part of the world save for the arctic. Fossils date their first appearance back to Jurassic times. Contrary to what you might think, the majority of wasp species are solitary, nesting only briefly to care for their offspring. The Ichneumon is a parasitoid family of wasps. It is believed that there are more species of Ichneumon than birds and mammals combined. The Ichneumons inject a host – caterpillars, spiders, moths or other, with their eggs which hatch and feed from the bodies until they die. The larva then emerges to pupate.

In 1860 Charles Darwin, troubled by the parasitoid cycle of the Ichneumon, wrote a letter to botanist Asa Grey expressing his profound doubt in the existence of a benevolent God. *I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us.*

Out on my fire escape Alex points out a tree crowning over the others and waving in a barely perceptible breeze: the Quaking Aspen, trying to find its own. We wave back.

If I got it right, Aspens never grow that far from each other. Or rather the ones that grow close are actually clones. Quaking Aspens are native to the colder areas of North America. They have a pale white bark and turn yellow in the fall. They tend to just bud out from one central root system, connecting under the earth like mycelium. In 1976, the largest male Quaking Aspen clonal organism was identified in Utah. It occupies around 100 acres, is estimated to be over 80,000 years old and weighs about 6,000,000 kg, which makes it the heaviest living organism known to man. They named it *Pando*, and it is now recognised as one of “The Great Wonders of America”.

On the fire escape we could spot the one just by its sway: back and forth like a body in prayer. Our tall dancer in a garden, bowing down humbly to the divine.

I read that the oldest depiction of a garden goes back to a fresco in a Villa in Pompeii. Gardens have for the most part been a sign of wealth, of power and luxury. In Medieval times, the most intricate gardens were often associated with Cloisters and Monasteries, where Nuns and Monks would grow flowers, medicinal plants, vegetables and even vines or apple trees, living in completely auto-sufficiency and in service to the sick. When Hildegard Von Bingen<sup>1</sup> compares the condition of man to a garden, she reassures us that no wise gardener or philosopher would place so much care and effort into a plot of land, if they did not expect it to grow fruitful and abundant.<sup>2</sup> She goes on, detailing the death of a lamb, reminding us of the sacrifice necessary

for our salvation. Yes, this is a profoundly Catholic account of cyclicity but in Von Bingen's cosmology, each plant, each rock, each animal, star and wind is accounted for. I couldn't find any mention of the Aspens though, but I am sure if one had danced in her garden it would have been recorded – its bark ripe with salicin, a remedy for pain.

Out of my window the Aspen is swaying more than ever, they keep announcing a severe thunderstorm watch even if there is no sign of rain. I try to find its twins, but can't spot them as easily as Alex can. I bet they warn each other through the ground that the storms are brewing. Funny thing about the Aspens – they seem to be immortal. Even through deforestation, there is no saying how far their roots reach. No saying which tree comes first, the one from which buds all others. Out of the city they say a sure bet for them to thrive is a forest fire. When sunlight pours onto ravaged clearings, it wakes the green sprouts.

In that same vision, Hildegard introduces the image of a pearl: pick out from rubbles and dirt, polished and purified as gold is purified from a fire. I can't quite seem to put it together, what a pearl has to do with a fire but the image sticks. One thing is for sure, you cannot rid the Aspen from the fire, the parasite from its prey nor the grain of sand from the pearl.

<sup>1</sup> Saint Hildegard Von Bingen (September 1098 - September 1179) was a German Benedictine abbess, writer, philosopher, composer, mystic, herbalist and medical practitioner during the Middle Ages.

<sup>2</sup> See Hildegard Von Bingen, *Scivias*: Book I, 2:32. Paulist Press. 1990