

NOTES FROM MADOO

Making a Garden in the Hamptons



ROBERT DASH



A Frances Tenenbaum Book
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NOTES FROM MADOO

For my parents,

Father there, Mother here,

in whose garden Madoo began

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PREFACE

May of 1965 found me in a car with the late realtor Judge Harold Hallock, feeling down and daunted. Nothing at all seemed suitable. But then—

"What is that?"

"Oh, just an old barn. You don't want that. Falling down.
It's been on the market for the longest time."

"But I do."

"Do you want to see it?"

"No need. It winked at me."

What I had seen was the <u>roofline</u> of an eighteenthcentury <u>hay</u> barn sailing above a <u>hedgerow</u>, in from Main Street, Sagaponack.

"It's on an acre. Some outbuildings, too. All really old. You might get another acre."

A year later, it was mine. In 1967 I moved in and began making the garden I call Madoo.

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ENGLISH BONES, AMERICAN FLESH

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My GARDEN is at the far eastern end of Long Island, in New York State, in a town settled in 1656. It is set amidst fields continually farmed since that time, and one would need a maul to separate it from its profoundly English influences. Yet it might take a wedge struck with equal force to pry it from its continuous involvement with the patterns of abstract expressionism, a largely American form of painting.

Within that pattern much else went toward the making of my garden: a love of Indian paths, rather like the secret walks small children make (which counts a lot for how one moves through my garden); an admiration of the roan beauties of abandoned farmland pierced by red cedars laced and tied by dog roses, honeysuckle, and brown, dry grass; the memory of a meadow of a single species of short, gray-leaved, flat-topped, open-flowered goldenrod, whose October display was feathered by hundreds of monarch butterflies. I have a stubborn Calvinist belief in utility, which causes me to plant vegetables among flowers, use herbs as borders and berry bushes as ornamentals. The

brutish littoral climate leads me to choose only such plants as have infinite stamina. There are recollections of an ancestor who planted hollyhocks at the gate and lilacs out back—but all gardens are a form of autobiography. Moreover, as a painter, I am predelicted toward shape, mass, and form and have learned that the predominant color of all gardens is green and all the rest is secondary bedeckment. Finally, there is something else—a fierce addiction to privacy, which is why my windbreak is thicker than it need be.

Madoo, which in an old Scots dialect means "My Dove," is the name of my garden of 1.98 acres, and I have been at it now since 1967. I have gone about it as I would a painting, searching for form rather than prefiguring it, putting it through a process more intuitive than intellectual. The blunders are there to learn from; the successes, more often than not, are the result of bold throws. I started from the house and went out toward the edges, often revising solid achievements until they seemed made of finer matter, like marks and erasures of work on paper, which sometimes may be torn and fitted again in collage.

Although I like white on white (the 'Duchess of Edinburgh' clematis on a white fence over *Rosa* 'Blanc Double de Coubert'), and I like to whiten white by throwing autumn clematis (*C. temiflora*) over yew, 'Huldine' over holly, the major push is for green on green. I have never cared much for all-gray gardens or all-blue gardens; indeed, I am not certain that they are ever successful, color being too quixotic to control in that fashion, full of lurking betrayals, so that sky blue becomes sea blue or slate blue and then not blue at all. The air over my garden, from whose several points I can see the Atlantic surf, is full of a most peculiar double light, rising and falling, and is itself one of

the heroes of my landscape, kinder to foliage and bark than to flowers. Wild air will always do the painting. I have increased the atmosphere's multiple shimmer by putting in three small ponds, above whose surfaces small mists sometimes gather. In contrast I have made darkness with a copse of twisted, pruned arctic willows and another of a spinney of fastigiate ginkgoes, the former underplanted with a mix of epimedium, woodruff, Japanese wood anemones, and ferns, and both washed with the littlest of spring bulbs. Paths are of brick, pebbles, or setts, or disks of telephone pole, or grass. Curves alternate with strict, straight geometries, the better to bound, heighten, and confine the predominantly relaxed, semiwild, superabundant atmosphere I like.

A meadow garden has been quite successful. Formerly, it was lawn giving a rather dull view from the dining table, made duller by summer heat and inevitable drought. America is no climate for lawns. I did not starve the soil to make the meadow but plunged robust, thrusty perennials through the grass into pits carefully nourished with well-rotted manure and much peat moss. It is roughly oval with a backing of Nootka cypress, cryptomeria, and rhododendron, whose darks perfectly outline the brighter foil of foliage.

To my way of seeing, a garden is not a succession of small rooms or little effects but one large tableau, whose elements are inextricably linked to the accomplishment of the entire garden, just as in painting all passages conduce to the effect of the whole. Lack of keyed strength in any one of them may lower the pitch and thrust of the finished canvas.

A muting of a too-perfect area is often in order, no matter

how lovely it might be. Just so I have found 'Silver Moon' clematises are too huge a cynosure to be acceptable to the general garden, and I have taken them out. One can very definitely have too much of a good thing, unless it be some grand groundcover like *Lamium* 'Nancy', whose very modest performance excludes it from the egregious. Subtlety is always more alluring. The quieter painting enters the heart and stays, when one of tremendous impact has long since faded away.

I do not paint in the way that I garden or garden as I would employ the brush, although the process is often the same - both are arts of the wrist, the broadest, largest sort of signature, if you will, highly idiosyncratic, the result of much doing, much stumbling, and highly intuited turns and twists before everything fits and adheres to the scale of one's intention. A good tree must often be moved to a more reticent spot when it begins to dominate and thus ruin the total orchestration. Beautiful tunes don't end up as symphonies, nor do witticisms write books. Certain flowers may emblazon a room but be abusive to a fine garden. For that reason and that of stamina and the ability to take the brunt of the climate (I am in Zone 7a, whose average lowest temperature is five to zero degrees Fahrenheit), I choose older varieties of the plant kingdom, whose foliage and blossom are, more often than not, circumspect and discreet.

I am now becoming more geometric. In front of the winter house and winter studio I have just installed a brick path I call a view-swiper. It is 120 feet long (flying out to the potato fields and to the ocean, bringing all that fine view inside the purview of the garden as if it were mine), 8 feet wide at the near end, 6 at the far, with 80 roses ('Fru Dag-

mar Hastrup') on the sides. The far border will have other, taller rugosa roses and daylilies mixed with teasels. The site is but a narrow spur attached to my property, surrounded by changing crops whose patterns of growth and tilling are overwhelmingly seductive, requiring only the simplest sort of anchor to moor the peninsula.

My canvases now have changed, too, and are rather like foliant form held very close to the eye. Both gestures, then, are new for me, and the feeling from both is a bit scary, akin to that of someone in the middle of a new high-wire act performing over a slowly withdrawing net. The air of gardens and paintings now seems to me to be filled with a wild, deliciously cold oxygen through which I can still see the first plain view of the working barns I converted three decades ago, gray above a blowing field of grass. That verdure, it seems to me, was the very soul of the place "working backwards, year by year," as John Koethe wrote in "The Near Future," until it "reached the center of a landscape."

The English bones with which I began now seem entirely covered by what I have done, but that is the way of flesh.

THE DEATH OF A FIELD

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piriture equinibility

Spiritual equanimity is so finely worked that all wild, wounding, or awesome events fire the brain but briefly. "Take heart," said Aeschylus, "for suffering, when it occurs at its highest, lasts but a little time." Longer, one's whole being might implode. Of the many mercies of spring, one is that we perceive its huge regeneration in a small quantum, as symbol rather than distributed occurrence. A single spear of a daffodil strap blue above yellow straw does nicely for the whole. Or it may be the moment we smell odors again and know that the great uncorking has begun once more.

Just so, the moment when roses are high, June becomes summer. And so the day late in autumn when the sky contracts and seems made of stone and one thinks one sees the diagonal zip of a snowflake cutting across the cedars. A moment as cold as the moment you are no longer loved and it is hard to breathe.

In the open fields of Sagaponack, spring is the first brown throw of earth falling over rye cover as a tractor cuts broadly, Sagg Main Street to Sagg Pond and then, engine regeared, pond back to street. Directly to the south this is, in Foster's fields, the widening brown finally meeting a horizon of sand where brown stops and Atlantic flats begin and skies begin to rise wet once more.

But not in the field to my west, not any year ever again. Ink started wounding it on a first bill of sale in 1968, and then more ink on more bills (three times in one year once), while profits bloomed from the contracts and rolled over in a mulch of lawyers, agents, and speculators. Each year the large question as to whether it would be farmed went up and down Main Street.

And then one winter in the mid-seventies large, bright rented cars rolled through the field, randomly scattering wintering geese. Strangers sat fogging the glass or got out dressed in the most improbable clothes and pointed. Day after day, up and down my drive, the dark blue and the black cars with whitewalls, doors slamming. Agents, brimming with good will, made the most flourishing gestures (rather like sweeps of the cavalier introducing audience to players, singers to orchestra), their gloved hands flashing above the empty winter stubble as if gathering all of the homes and the lands and the gardens of Sagaponack, which too were part of the vibrant tableau offered for sale.

The field was done in. Wooden sticks sprayed Day-Glo orange gored the earth, and red rags and flags were tied to the branches of the hedgerow. Concrete columns called "monuments" were slipped into the outlines of the plats. An eighteenth-century English oast house was disassembled, beams numbered and stacked for shipment to the lot immediately adjoining mine. The profile of any oast house is eerily similar to the stacks of Three Mile Island.

All was surveyed in the bright light of plane geometry, as