

The New Garden
or
Histories of the Garden of Ninfa

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Prologue

On the bank of a small lake in the Pontine Marshes in the foothills of the Monti Lepini, the ruined walls of a medieval church stand apart like a set of ribs buried in the dirt. The church no longer has its vaulted ceiling or delicate stained-glass windows or rows of wooden pews; it is now an open air, nearly borderless temple occupied by a display of cypress trees, moss, lichen, roses and ivy. All that remain are these two walls – the back of the church, concave and settled in a dense bed of grass, and the front of the church, now doorless with a rope strung through it to keep visitors from crossing its threshold. This is the Church of the Santa Maria Maggiore, and it stands in the Caetani family's Garden of Ninfa.

This is a story of histories – ecological, fictional, chronological, mythological – that a single place holds in its ecologies, its ruins and in the residue of memory. This is the story of networks of water, roses, stones and roots. Some elements are imagined, others are indisputable, all of it is, I've decided, truthful. This is the story of a garden.

One very early May morning in 1964, Leila Caetani-Howard decided it was time to stop pretending to sleep and go for a morning swim. It was the last few hours before the garden would reopen to visitors after months of a restful, quiet off-season. Through the delicate darkness of an Italian dawn, Leila exited her small house on the garden grounds down winding, pebbled paths past ancient oak trees, clusters of Japanese bamboo, dew-dappled moss, ruins pummeled by time, and networks of percussive streams, until she crossed the garden's twenty acres to a small bank opening onto the lake. She draped her robe onto a fallen tree covered in unbloomed hydrangea

bulbs, released her long, grey hair from its twist on her head, took a deep breath in, and plunged herself into the water, breaking the glass of the sleeping lake's surface.

The water was glacially cold, but the shocking temperature had become sweetly familiar to Leila by now. She surfaced just up to under her nose, taking in the little lake's shoreline; Japanese maple branches, marsh iris petals and rose-colored wisteria reached into the water, and the Santa Maria Maggiore was coming into view in the quiet sunrise. Small menisci of Gerridae legs corrugated the surface around her as she tread through the water, her feet finding the soft soil of the lakebed below. She dug her toes in and breathed in the morning. This was one of Leila's ways of being a part of the garden, of reminding herself and the living creatures of Ninfa that she was there, that she knew and tended to them, that she had a hand and a voice and a gaze willing and uniquely able to approach them all, unlike the tourists who were not permitted to go beyond the limits of the pebbled paths. She swam here to make herself a part of the garden and apart from fleeting visitors. Or perhaps it was mostly for herself. There might be no better way to begin the day than to plunge oneself into ancient, freezing mountain water steeped in volcanic soil. She had yet to find a more effective way to come to the living world of her garden of roses and ruins than this morning dip.

The sun had almost completely risen by now, so Leila stepped out of the water and wrapped her robe tightly around her waist, twisting her freezing, damp hair into a heap on top of her head. She walked back barefoot, her sandals in hand.

She took the western-most path back to the house, passing the ruins of the Santa Maria Maggiore. Water still dripping down her legs, Leila stopped and squared off in the doorway. At the opposite end of the mossy aisle, on the back wall of the church, a faded fresco clung to the stone. All that remained of what must have been an impressive rendering of some biblical scene

were the softened, worn portraits of two figures, one male and one female. The orange, purple, green, gold and blue pigments of the fresco had faded into softened tones complimentary to that of the stone to which the wilting paint gripped. After decades of living at Ninfa, Leila still wasn't sure who these portraits depicted. Some days she would stare at the fresco after her swim and be glad she didn't know who these figures were, standing comfortably in the mystery; other days she would decide which biblical characters they were – Mary and Joseph, perhaps – and continue her walk in temporary satisfaction; sometimes she would stand here, at the foot of the Maggiore, staring angrily down the aisle, waiting in vain for the fresco to introduce itself. Today she was somewhere between curious and frustrated. It was time to go back to the house, though. She had a meeting with a young writer hoping to take up residence in the garden for the spring season. She'd come back to the fresco later.

What Leila did not know was that on this early morning, and every early morning, the decaying faces of the Maggiore's fresco stared back at her. These morning moments with Leila, though innumerable in her memory, were flickers for this medieval fresco that had been a witness to a timescale Leila saw only as intangible memory, a history only spoken but never quite knowable. The Santa Maria Maggiore in Leila's small, private garden was once the Santa Maria Maggiore of the medieval town of Ninfa.

Ninfa became a significant region of Italy during the height of the Roman Empire as it was a stop along the Appian way, the main line between Naples and Rome. During the Roman Empire, Ninfa was a small but thriving agricultural village that served passing troops, politicians and travelers along the impressive Appian Way. Their wealth grew, and by the middle ages, Ninfa was a thriving, wealthy city with influence in Rome, Naples and even the Vatican. In the

shadow of the expansive Santa Maria Maggiore, a merchant and mill town burst with potential energy and wealth in both agriculture and trade. As politics within and outside the Vatican became increasingly unstable, however (Pope Alexander III was consecrated in Ninfa to escape the threat of the Holy Roman Empire, and soon disputes over who had been elected Pope led to simultaneous Papal elections and consecrations), Ninfa was sacked and burned by the Holy Roman Empire. The houses, churches, mills, hospices, bridges, castles and town halls were almost entirely destroyed. These two frescoed figures survived fires, raids and the complete abandonment of Ninfa – what the world must look like from their apse. (Lazio Nascosto)

Historical turmoil in Ninfa, however, was not just superterranean. Ninfa rests on layers of ecological battles and redistributions of power spanning across millions of years, far before the flicker of history of the Roman Empire. The modern Garden of Ninfa is nestled within the Pontine Marshes, a series of wetlands fifty miles south of Rome. Wetlands present tremendous ecological, agricultural and economic potential – nutrient rich soil, ready access to water – yet they also present tremendous challenges in harvesting that potential. Flooding, drought and general unpredictability are characteristics of these ancient oases, and traditional techniques for controlling landscape tend not to work in wetlands. The wetlands of the Pontine Marshes formed in the Pliocene era, about 5.3 to 2.5 million years ago, in which expansion of crust created a small valley exaggerated by the surrounding Volscian mountains. Over time, mountain run-off and layers of sediment created the current topography of horsts (a flat section of earth that has risen slightly) and grabens (a flat, lowered section of earth, offset by horsts). This topography created valley lagoons that remained for millions of years until the Pleistocene (600-360 years BP), where cycles of volcanic eruption began to disrupt the chemical balance of the landscape. Volcanic sediment from eruptions in the surrounding area settled in the valley and gathered in

dunes above sea level, forming beaches and enclosing the graben-lagoons from sea water.

Undulation, mixing and fusion between peat, clay, magma and other volcanic sediment rebalanced the valley floor and created the setting for the wetlands to form. (Walsh, “Pontine Marshes”)

Surrounding this evolving valley are the Volscian Mountain range, where Monti Lepini is found, made of porous limestone. With heavy rains, the mountain absorbs tremendous amounts of water, creating fonts of springs and ground water in its foothills. Ninfa is at the site of one of Monti Lepini’s most significant springs. Alluvial deposits – that is, deposits of clay and sediment made by rivers or springs that produces especially nutritionally rich soil – began to develop over the area, nourishing the earth, creating Ninfa and the modern wetlands of the Pontine Marshes. This is the history of the dirt stuck beneath Leila’s toenails and the water that she squeezed out of her hair onto the stone floor of her small bathroom (Walsh, “Pontine Marshes”).

The sun had fully risen by now, and Leila ate a small breakfast in her kitchen overlooking the north corner of the garden. The open window brought in an early spring breeze and wafts of wisteria blooms through the dark wooden window frame. Leila’s husband, Hubert, was back in America for diplomatic business, otherwise *he* would meet this young writer and tour them around the garden, while Leila sat in some secluded corner, painting, or blending into the shrubbery, tending to blooms and lichen and clearing sticks from the network of streams that cut through the garden. Today she would have to take after her mother and play the hostess.

In listless preparation, Leila took down a family photo album from a shelf above the kitchen fireplace and sifted through the photos. Portraits of princes and princesses, diplomats and politicians alongside their usually artistic spouses filled the album’s time-worn pages.

Composers, painters, sculptors and architects with politicians, noblemen and diplomats capture the essence of this ancient, artistic, public family. Everyone in this album was either an artist or a dedicated patron of the arts. Leila smiled down at the yellowed pages. She felt entirely in the artists' camp, as she was a painter and sculptor herself, and was proud to count herself among the many creative members of her family. (The Roffredo Caetani Foundation)

The Caetani family had been in Ninfa since the 16th century when her paternal line overtook what was at that point an effectively deserted mill town. As was the case with many towns and cities in marshes like the Pontini, the town had been taken out by malaria and other water-borne illnesses due to ineffective irrigation. The Caetani attempted to restore much of the infrastructure and buildings that the town abandoned, as well as reirrigate the marshes to better serve what they hoped would be an agricultural city. Using what architecture was left as well as the artistic and engineering expertise of the family, the Caetani expanded churches and resurrected town halls, cleared forests and reoriented water flow. They quickly found, though, that the wetlands were extremely difficult to control. Any attempt at draining the marsh was in vain, forests were cleared to no end and conventions of agriculture did not stand in this strange, tropical valley nested in an otherwise traditional landscape. In the 18th century, Pope Pious VI took over this seemingly impossible project and reclaimed the Pontine Marshes – only to abandon the project himself. (Dennet, 1-240).

By the late 18th century, ruins that had been saved and abandoned, restored and raided, dragged forward through time – perhaps beyond their destined lifespans by curious, cocky settlers – stood alone, crumbling in the emerald slime that had become Ninfa. In the 19th century, however, Gelasio Caetani, of the family's diplomat-nobleman camp, returned to Ninfa and dedicated himself to its restoration and redesign as a garden. Given the vibrant, Edenic quality of

the ecological systems found in Ninfa, Gelasio decided it would be best to design the garden in the English style rather than the Italian style. The conventions of English landscape design center around creating harmonious, painterly scenes of nature's sublime beauty. Common features of the English garden are wide, rolling segments of lawn, graveled walkways, clusters of trees softened by dense flower beds, interspecies displays around ruins, a pretended overgrowth of vines and leaves, naturalistic shaping of shrubs and growth, all broken up by romantic bridges, piers, ponds and pavilions. Water features like fountains and lakes should not overpower the natural world they stand inside, and instead serve as a mirror for the characters of nature within the garden. (Whately, "English Landscape Gardening") It is all to seem elegantly irregular, a fusion of species from around the world in a harmony of humanless curation.

Gelasio oversaw this massive project but his brother, Roffredo, and his sister-in-law, Marguerite Caetani, are considered the great curators of this new English-style garden of Ninfa. Marguerite, the daughter of a wealthy American family educated in England, had an extraordinary ability to curate the interspecies, Edenic harmony that characterizes modern Ninfa. Adapting to, rather than fighting, the off-shooting springs of the River Ninfa, Marguerite used the finger-like currents of luminescent mountain water as a grid from which her vast collection of flowers, shrubs, trees and other vegetation from around the world might be planted. The garden is now home to over 1,000 varieties of plants: Chinese bamboo and Japanese magnolia variations, yucca plants and cedar trees are distributed purposefully across the garden. Marguerite's favorite plant was the rose, and practically every iteration of this flower can be found in Ninfa: yellow roses, pale pink 'Complicata' roses, iceberg white, cream-colored and red roses are perhaps Ninfa's most prominent motif. Climbing roses prove not only to thrive in Ninfa's nearly tropical climate but help maintain the ruins by serving as a secondary binding for

the aging stone walls. Weeping cherry trees, Himalayan and Mexican Pine trees, lavender plants and banana trees encircle low, sweeping lawns, while the river leading out of the lake is lined with hazelnut groves. Poplar trees and climbing hydrangeas tower over moss and lichen-covered bridges. (“Garden of Ninfa,” Lazio Nascosto)

Roffredo, Marguerite’s husband, used his expertise as a composer and musician to curate the intangible atmosphere of the garden. Redirecting small portions of the River Ninfa as well as small off-shooting streams (without completely uprooting the river routes), Roffredo created networks of small water bridges, no wider than this sheet of paper, and tuned them to certain babbling tones so that the music of the streams would vary in visitors’ ears depending on where they were in the garden. Roffredo and Marguerite not only put Ninfa on display but curated its atmosphere, its scents, its shape and its voice. In the traditional English style, they emphasized, rather than fought, the presented environment of ruins, nutrient-rich volcanic soil and networking rivers to show how much can thrive in one place – and then removed the remnants of their human intervention by creating an accidental-ness in its design. This is the story of Leila’s mother and father. (Dennet, 1-242)

Some buried, childish part of Leila didn’t want to share her parents’ garden with others. It made her happy to see visitor’s gape at the lush romance of the place, but part of Leila wanted the garden to be for her, her mother and her father alone. Leila, after all, knew something about the garden that few people really understood: Ninfa, after its namesake, is a garden made by and for the spirit of the Nymphai. Smiling, Leila resolved to tell the young writer *this* history rather than the one printed in their pamphlets.

She would not begin in the 16th century as the tours of the garden usually did, nor would she begin in the 10th century when the Santa Maria Maggiore was built – she wouldn’t even

begin in the Pliocene era. The story of Ninfa, she decided, would begin with Zeus and his daughters, the Nymphai, divinities of rivers, grottos, streams, wild things and mountain air, as they descended onto this oasis and gathered the earth in a quiet, musical, harmonious union of natural splendor. The Nymphai of Ninfa watch over all living things in the garden but can never be seen by mortals. Most people don't even notice the world the Nymphai sustain. But Ninfa is a home to Nymphai as well as humans, and it is within the tropical boundaries of these wetlands that one can drink the clear, Olympian water they make for themselves and witness the flowers that drink the same water bloom, opening into the wild sunlight of Ninfa and live as they choose to live, within a unique, sublime display of the evolution of living things (*Nymphs*). This, too, is history, Leila thought.

The sound of crushed gravel broke through the hum of streams and whispering breeze, and Leila, uncharacteristically excited for company, descended the stairs to meet her visitor. She wondered whether they would believe this history, or to what degree; she wondered what world this stranger would introduce to the garden – perhaps they could decipher the wilting faces of the Maggiore fresco. One day --

Epilogue

One does not have to visit Ninfa to witness the sublime metaphor of a garden ruin. Ruins are all around us; histories trod on other histories making layers and layers of sedimented memory. We attempt to reach back and preserve what we find and what we recognize as history, put ropes and signs next to what is worth saving before it slips into the irretrievable current of passing time. We have the opportunity, however, if we tune in, listen, plunge into ancient water, to witness not the linear burial of history but the concentric spheres of experience that stamp out, burst from, bloom from, foster and recede into endless streams of passing time. Know the nymph and the volcanic dirt and the daughter and the architect and the artist; and wonder whether the stories of dirt and brick and pebbles and hair and toenails and roses and Gerridae and water and pigments are not fragmented but fused by an interdependent timescale of consequence, massive and minute. A garden is history made tangible – not just human history, not just ecological history, not just artistic history, not just mythological history, but all histories, networking to create an interdependent, natural monument to time's passage.

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