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Opening extract from
The Poison Garden

Written by

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For my godson, Ben Charlton-Fabian

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The Garden of Dreams

In and out the dusky bluebells,
In and out the dusky bluebells,
In and out the dusky bluebells,
Following the Master.

Traditional

One

High in the tower the bell tolled, counting out eleven hours. Spring fields spread away from the church. Bluebells swayed in the shadow of the graveyard wall and petals from the apple tree drifted over the heads of the mourners as the funeral procession moved along the narrow path.

Thomas was ten years old and walked behind his mother. She held his infant sister in one arm, his little brother with the other hand. His four elder siblings walked beside him, all in black. Ahead, his father helped carry the narrow coffin out of the church.

They were burying Thomas's grandmother, Augusta Jane Williams. His mother, pale and tired, wept intermittently while juggling the baby. Silky white petals clung to the brim of her black hat, with its mothy feathers.

'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery,' said the vicar.

'He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower: he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay . . .'

Another gust of wind tugged a cloud of petals from the apple tree and lifted the purple stole that hung around the vicar's neck. Thomas looked away, his attention snagged on the hawthorn

hedge beyond the wall. He could see a shadow beneath the leaves and may blossom.

This piece of darkness, of indefinable shape, stuck out a black-gloved hand, flexed long fingers – and waved.

Thomas shook his head. Who was it, signalling to him? He looked again. The mysterious hand had disappeared. He wanted to run over and find out to whom the hand belonged – and why this person was hiding. But propriety held him in place. The mystery niggled, an itch he wanted to scratch.

After the burial, they returned to his grandmother's house. It was a dark, substantial building overlooking the village green. Inside, a meal of bread and cold meats awaited them on a table in the dining room.

'I am so sorry for your loss, Ellen.' An elderly and stooped great-aunt had taken his mother's hand between her own lace-mittened fingers and peered into her face. Ellen was an only child but Augusta had been one of twelve children – ten of whom had survived into old age. They hovered now, these survivors, in the gloomy dining room, a colony of gaunt old rooks contemplating the meal and eyeing up the silver.

Thomas tugged at his collar. He ached to leave the stuffy room and its cargo of elderly relatives. His brothers and sisters, bridled by their good manners, were also chomping at the bit for escape. Dieter, their father, pale and gaunt with a cap of dark, fur-like hair, frowned at his brood – the mass of little boys and girls doling out surreptitious kicks and silent gesticulated insults.

'Take them outside,' he said to his eldest daughter, under his breath. One of the crones glanced over and sniffed, doubtless thinking what ill-tempered children they were, to fret so at their grandmother's funeral.

'Take the baby,' he said. 'Let your mother have a rest.'

Christabel, just thirteen, was used to the mantle of responsibility. She took the baby with scarcely a sigh and signalled to the others. They followed her, a noisy herd rejoicing at their sudden liberation, into Grandmother's sumptuous garden.

Once outside, with one mind, the children started to run – ignoring Christabel's orders – away from the house and into the depths of the garden. It was a maze of paths and groves, dense flower beds and sheltered alcoves. Late tulips, the colour of claret and amber, burned in the shelter of the red brick wall. Thomas stretched out his arms, taking a deep breath of fresh air. His little brother galloped past, whooping.

The garden – his grandmother's passion. More than her dead husband, more than her family, Augusta had loved her garden. She had a study furnished with books and drawings about her plants and their uses. Often Thomas had spied her working in the kitchen with leaves, fruits and seeds – variously brewing and stewing, chopping, pulverising, steaming or steeping all manner of produce from the garden. A pantry in the kitchen, kept locked with a key Augusta stored in her pocket, contained bundles of dried herbs, tins of herbal tea and ranks of jars filled with curious pickles and jams each identified with a label written in Augusta's ornate hand. He had read one of the labels, when he was about seven or eight, sneaking in while his grandmother's back was turned. It said something very curious: Juniper Jam for Dreams of Remembered Sadness.

She had seemed a sour old woman, dressed in sable, an expression of grievance etched on her flour-white face – but this obsession with plants had intrigued him. For as long as he could remember, Thomas had followed her, shadowed her footsteps, peered into the study, picked up her books, glimpsed the contents of the pantry, wondering what she was doing, mesmerised by her

devotion to her studies. Augusta, always, had shooed him away and shut the door. But his long enduring dedication had caught her notice. Once or twice, even as she scolded him for pushing his finger into a bowl of setting jam, he'd observed her calculating consideration of his persistent interest.

Standing in the garden, bereaved as the garden was also bereaved, Thomas felt the ache of an unexpected sadness, to think his grandmother was dead. Her absence was more real to him in the garden than it had been at the funeral. She would never walk here again. As soon as he could, Thomas broke away from the herd of sisters and brothers and headed off alone. He rarely had a moment to himself and he yearned for a silent space to consider his thoughts. And while he hadn't been exactly close to his grandmother, her garden was an entirely different matter.

She'd told him once, with a scowl, that the garden covered an acre of land. A wall, in a cloak of shining leaves, marked its boundary and joined the sides of the house. A single narrow iron gate to the east (often locked) opened from the front garden – the respectable neat-rows-of-flowers façade presented to the public. Thomas remembered staring through the gate when he was small, pressing his face between the wrought iron bars and gazing into the heart of the enclosed garden. How mysterious it had seemed to him – the hedges of thorns and roses, the gravelled paths leading off into shadowed groves, the perfume of musk and nectar drifting in almost tangible threads from the tangle of fruits and blooms.

Thomas stretched out his hand and touched a fat white blossom with the tips of his fingers. Fragile yellow veins flowed through the cool petals. Soft pollen dusted his skin. Inside the house his grandmother's solicitor would soon be reading the will. He had heard his parents whispering – understood how poor they were, how frequently his father's money-making ventures came to

nothing. Everything should change, now his grandmother was dead. They had expectations and stood to inherit her house and fortune, and this, her astonishing garden. He stood up straight and thrust his hands in the pocket of his too-small jacket, looking to left and right, feeling, along with his sadness, an anticipatory sense of ownership.

He was standing on a diamond of untrimmed grass, with a sundial on a plinth in the centre. The grass was enclosed by dark shrubs and trellises upholstered with rambling rose bushes. Behind him the path led back to the bed of herbs at the rear of the house, where the maids cultivated rosemary, sage and coriander for the kitchen.

The sundial was made of a pale, silver metal, etched with Roman numerals and a mesh of circular and elliptical shapes. Although the sun was high, the curved pin rising from the centre didn't cast a shadow. Thomas pressed the palms of his hands on the face of the sundial. The metal sent a shock of cold through his bones, but he didn't move, feeling the etched patterns on his skin.

From here, paths led away: left, right and straight ahead. These paths branched, converged, doubled back, or came to dead ends, and en route offered other inviting side paths through little gates, under tunnels of greenery or over decorative garden stiles, opening on to lavish vegetable gardens, glasshouses for fruit and exotic flowers, elaborate and fragrant herb beds.

Beyond the shrubs he could hear the voices of his brothers and sisters. A game was in progress and if they found him, Thomas would be expected to join in. He looked back once towards the house, sensing movement, thinking one of his siblings was seeking him out. He couldn't see anyone, but he turned again, uneasily, remembering the hand that had waved at him from the hedge, during his grandmother's funeral.

'Christabel?' His voice had an edge – annoyance, and a note of apprehension. Something wasn't quite right. The garden seemed to shift around him.

'Come out, I can see you!' Still no response, though Thomas's sense of being observed intensified. He turned around again, trying to catch the watcher.

There – on the sundial – stood a wooden box with its lid open. Where had it come from? Thomas frowned. Someone had crept up on him and – he presumed – left it for him to find. Thomas stood tall, determined to look confident, and peered at this mysterious gift.

It was hard to see inside – the interior was dark and vague. He raised his hand, thinking to explore the contents but caution held him back. Then he heard a whistle. A jaunty, encouraging whistle – someone seeking his attention. Thomas looked up. A new path had materialised, leading away from the sundial.

Thomas stood and stared. He glanced back at the box, and the amorphous darkness it contained. Was there a connection between the box and this new path? How could a path just appear from nowhere? Perhaps he simply hadn't noticed it before. But how could that be?

The path beckoned. A gravel path, a tunnel of briars like the fabled passageway in a folk tale, it whispered and enticed. Thomas could not resist.

As soon as he passed beneath the roof of thorny stems, Thomas sensed he had moved into an entirely different space. He was in his grandmother's garden no longer – at least, not the garden he had known. Here the air was different – cool and strangely perfumed, the sky an unearthly turquoise.

The path veered one way, then another, before emerging at a cultivated patch edged by a low stone wall, where squashes and

pumpkins, strangely shaped, grew in profusion. He saw a grove of willow trees by a pond where large golden flowers grew on sighing reeds. He was far away now, too far to hear the voices of his siblings. This part of the garden seemed largely untended. Rhododendron bushes created a jungle, narrow paths punctuated by natural caves among the twisted branches and leathery leaves.

Thomas pushed his way into this jungle. The stinging perfume of the flowers caught in his throat. Sometimes he found pathways. At other times, he had to force a way through densely growing stems. The roots reached out to trip him. Malicious clawed twigs poked his eyes and scratched his face. But Thomas, frustration chewing in his belly, was not deterred. He ground his teeth and slapped the leaves in a temper. At last he emerged on a narrow grass path. To the left – which Thomas surmised was vaguely the way he had come – the path ran downhill to a tall gate. To the right, the path rose to the crest of a hill. Hot now, he took off his jacket and dropped it on the floor and set off up the hill.

At the summit he stopped and shaded his eyes. Perhaps a storm was coming, because the turquoise sky was a pale green colour and the clouds huddled in an anxious circle. The path now dropped down to a marvellous orchard. How inviting it looked, a dozen fruit trees covered in blossom. Thomas felt his spirits lift. He set off at a gallop, down the hill to a narrow green gate through the broken fence.

'Make sure you close the gate – or the goat will get out.'

Thomas jumped. The voice came out of nowhere. He looked around, without result, for the speaker. He could see no goat either, though it seemed pointless to close the gate because the fence was so decayed it wouldn't prove an obstacle to any domestic animal. Still, he did as he was told.

'Over here,' the voice said. A man's voice, well spoken. It

possessed a pleasant musical quality, making Thomas wish to hear more. He stepped away from the gate and looked around the orchard. It was hard to make out what lay beyond the fence – the view was occluded by blossom or else seemed to melt into shade.

A loud bleat – and all of a sudden the animal was standing beside him, a tall black goat with long curved horns and cold yellow eyes. It pressed its bony body against his leg, jaws chomping on some mashed-up vegetable matter. It bleated again. Thomas was unnerved by the creature's grinding yellow teeth and the wicked horns, so he sidled away and peered into the heart of the orchard. The branches seemed to draw back, revealing a man in black who leaned against a stump of old stone.

'There you are,' Thomas said, without thinking. 'I mean, I'm sorry. I couldn't see you at first.'

He walked towards the man, intrigued by this stranger in his grandmother's garden. Presumably he was a mourner who, like Thomas, had wandered off into the garden.

'Here I am,' the man said. His prop, the stone, stuck up from the ground like a giant's thumb; a dull grey, with coins of lichen, and shaped by centuries of weather.

The man was tall and very thin, with coils of long and rather greasy hair. He wore a stained suit, a white shirt, an emerald waistcoat with a gold watch chain and a short top hat with half a dozen pheasant feathers in the brim. The suit, shiny at the knees and elbows, had a dried rose pinned to a lapel.

'And here you are,' the man mused, studying Thomas intently. 'Fancy that.' His face was narrow and bony, with a jutting chin and long slender nose. His pale, unlined skin made it hard for Thomas to assess how old the man might be. The same age as his father? Something suggested he might be much older than that.

'Did you go to the funeral?' Thomas said.

The man tipped his head to the side. 'Of course I did. I waved – don't you remember?'

It came to him in a flash, the black-gloved hand emerging from the hawthorn bush.

'But why did you hide? Why didn't you come into the church?'

'Ah well,' the man said. 'All those people, you see. All those relatives. If I turned up – well. They'd want to know how I knew her.' He looked away from Thomas, up to the blossom on the trees and his eyes glittered. Thomas chewed his lip and wished he had his jacket on, so he could thrust his hands into his pockets. But he couldn't resist the question.

'How *did* you know her?' he said.

The man looked down at his scuffed, pointed boots and smiled. He stretched out his fingers, still gloved, and pushed back his hat.

'Your grandmother? You look a little like her. Yes! Though I can see that doesn't much please you. I've known her a long time – since she was a beautiful girl. She had dark chestnut hair, you know – the colour of a ripe conker that first moment you open its case.'

Thomas tried – and failed – to imagine his grandmother with shining, conker-coloured hair.

'This garden,' he said, screwing up his eyes. 'I don't recognise it. Where am I? Everything changed after I looked in the box. Did you leave it for me to find?'

'I did,' the man said. 'And you're right. This is no ordinary garden. It is Broceliande, the Garden of Dreams, your grandmother's secret garden, Thomas Kurt Reiter.'

'A secret garden,' Thomas mused. 'How do you know my name?'

'Your grandmother told me, of course. Your father's German, I think.'

'My father's parents are German. My father was born in England,' Thomas said, very precisely. 'And, sir, what's your name?'

The man interlaced his fingers, and stretched them till the joints cracked.

'My name?' He considered Thomas, eyebrows lowered, evidently deep in thought. Then, coming to some decision, he said: 'Blake. Nehemiah Alfred Blake, in full. But you, Herr Reiter, may call me Blake.'