

The Other Garden

Nick Lenz



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by Nick Lenz, USA

Sometimes I think I knew him well, but usually I don't wish to believe it. I did, however, learn his secret. To me he was both a friend and a teacher. He was also an ogre, an agitator—that was when he was young and just beginning his fabulous collection of bonsai.

"If only one could accelerate time on some days and not others," he would complain, a green glitter dancing off his eyes as his gaze wandered off across the field to the edge of the forest. "You know, the problem is that we don't live long enough to grow our bonsai to perfection. A paradox—by the time we're old enough to do them well, we are hobbling flesh and don't want to bother. Look Jane, you are just beginning. Every year you pick up a few new shoots and twigs to work on. Scrawny little runt things with no age. Look at my stuff—where is the sense of age that makes a bonsai so breathtaking? Who will pick up on your trees when you die? You are not Japanese. Even the Japanese aren't Japanese any more. My kid will be running a satellite station or something, not perfecting my trees for another generation. No, Jane, we need more time to grow our little things."

A tiny fluff of cumulus slipped across the sky, casting a momentary shadow on the bonsai garden. Jack switched his gaze to a maple bonsai clutching a rough stone with scraggly little roots. It leaned out from the rock, reaching toward the cool shade of the imagined glen below. "Jane, in time these roots could engulf the entire rock. But I sure won't be watering this tree when that happens."

The first time I saw Jack's collection, I came with the matron of Boston bonsai. She lived in a small mansion. Jack lived in an old, crooked cape with old, crooked fences, barns, automobiles, dogs, and greenhouse. Behind this last structure of warping wood and crinkly glass was his garden. On a grassy knoll edging into a stand of huge pines was the miniature forest that enchanted me. These were his bonsai that he composed so well to suggest scenes from other regions of the country or the world, places I had also hiked. I was intimidated by his wild appearance and pedantic speech, but I was fascinated by his work.

The duck pie we had for lunch was worth the trip, as well as seeing a collection of bonsai that someone was actually trying to improve. I mused then on how gorgeous they might be in a century or two.

This is when Jack was young, noticeably younger than I. Years went by, taking their toll on my small trees—a thunderstorm here, a spring wilt there, a plague of caterpillars everywhere^{1/4} I enjoyed many duck pies and caught up on Jack's new bonsai projects, but eventually, Jack grew older than I and so did his bonsai. If you've ever browsed through the volumes of photographs sent from Japan, you will know what age means to a bonsai. Tree after tree is sculpted for decades or centuries to convey the world of winds, calms, droughts, deluges, mountains, and bogs. Some of their trunks may be a foot wide, even if the tree is but two feet high. This is nurture by time.

Or so I thought until Jack's collection changed dramatically—and much more quickly than I could explain. Before Jack caught the bonsai bug, he was a scientist who worked in the mountains. Suddenly, he was a bonsai artist and a brick layer. Then he became a teacher of bonsai, always exploring new whims to obtain faster aging. And then, toward the last, his trees became old, unbelievably old looking as did he—not nearly as old as his trees. He dropped out of the bonsai world of the Boston matron and the international bonsai politics that kept me so busy. His body lost its dance, even if his eyes did not. I would see him on the sidelines of some convention or symposium finalizing the sale of some super bonsai or another. I had no idea it was his “junk”.

He once told me: “Jane, why don't you people realize that the secret of bonsai is its beauty, eternal beauty, and that eternity means time, lots of it.” Those eyes would harden as he glanced from gnarled larch to twisted apple. “I suppose this is what art is about, beating your head against a tree trunk until you either gain a sense of humor or cut off your ears in despair.”

But this was long ago. As I say, I became active and Jack, well, he had not been popular with the national group. I mean, a bonsai organization is as sensitive as a bonsai tree itself. It is always full of pests that can't be picked off and it never grows the way you planned. Diplomacy is necessary to keep bonsai growers spending and the organization growing. Jack? He was too preachy.

When Jack's wife died, I was just too busy to send sympathies. Now that he was single again, I became even more interested in finding out about his design approach, but I was simply too embarrassed. So I turned down quite a few duck pies. He, in turn, became silent. But then, one day, being in the area, I decided to drop in and check him out, especially his basis for an outrageous article in the Bonsai Gazette that somehow made it past the editorial board.

“Suppose you had a time fold in your back yard, or in your bathtub for that matter. What if you walked exactly the right way one night beneath the mist of the shower and found yourself suddenly beneath the torrent of a waterfall on an alien world? Would you panic or would you exploit an experience that few Middle American bathtubs can offer? Suppose you spent several hours enjoying your alien shower and then returned to your home Kohler version to find that no one had missed you at all, that you had been gone for only a few scant moments? Or better yet, what if you vacationed for a week in bathtub land and were gone only long enough to have taken a quick shower. The only problem might be that you were a week older, as was anything you brought with you.

“To bonsai growers ¼ ” And then he rambled on about the nature of slow growth in bonsai or the appearance of the same so that “every twig looked as if it had been formed by one hundred years of worried growth and how the need to accelerate this process artificially was the only solution in a non-hand-me-down society, blah blah blah. But of course, he did not write how this was to be done. He just annoyed us again by igniting our imaginations and then fussing at us. His two photographs of outstanding cherry bonsai grown from seedlings were so ancient looking and perfect that everyone suspected he had enhanced or faked them.

So I was in a skeptical mood when I drove up from Amherst, yet tingly. I knew he was on to a new technique to fake age and the accumulation of time.

Only one senile dog greeted me at the top of the now rutted driveway. No one came to greet me. The farm had always looked old but deliberately so. It now seemed to be derived from a Wyeth painting, as would a fine bonsai. The courtyard was bare of any contemporary artifacts. Before, there had always been objects of bright plastic or spoked wheels for the child to push about. Now there was just wood and irregular landscaping. "Here," I thought, "He has pulled it all together, has perfected the composition." Before, it was squalid. Now, with the wife and child gone, it was immaculately squalid.

I pulled myself out of the car and took in the serenity with impatience. Jack emerged from the door of the crooked house with a tired smile. There were the usual cautious greetings and then he broke out with: "Well, I have a surprise for you—several hundred of them."

"Oh?" was all I could manage.

"Don't I always have?"

"Yes, like the one in the Gazette that $1\frac{1}{4}$ " The sentence and the determined scowl I had practiced in the mirror went unnoticed. He was already leading me around the greenhouse. The grass was unmowed and tall seed heads grabbed at my bag. The trail ended at my first surprise. A huge fence now stood where before the bonsai had faced open field. Jack stopped at a massive gate. Suppressing the grin that awaited the anticipated "oohs" and "ahs", he impishly swung it open with a touch of a forefinger. There I saw the grand surprise. The display area was no bigger than it had ever been, but, but, I had never seen anything like it before. Ten years I had been absent. How could this be possible in ten years? Bonsai so old looking, so warty, so rugged $\frac{1}{4}$ Not an "ooh" escaped my breath which came back to me ten minutes later. Jack was standing next to me, his eyes fixed far away in a dreamy, slow waltz. Then: "You know, Jane, I have never wanted to be anything but a super bonsai artist. I neglected my wife and she died. I neglected my kid and he is off flying fake satellites. So I have been alone for a while to putter, and that I have done. Then he started preaching on what was new, but nothing was new. They were the same bonsai of his youth but centuries older."

I could never take in more than eight of his bonsai at a time, so complex yet subtle were they. Now I had the feeling that I walked in a fairyland of delight, pursued slowly by envy. It seemed like hours before we reached the far wall. Here was another gate, closed, and a tall structure tucked urgently into the pine forest behind it. I gazed at it only momentarily because I was drawn to the tiny maple that had always perched on the shelf there. Its roots had completely overgrown the rock except for one quartz crystal. "What's this?" I asked, astonished by the ancient lump of designed wood that had but ten years ago been a tiny tree reaching toward a shady glen. The glen had become trunk and unbelievably old. However had he done it?

As if ready my thought, he answered: "I'm getting older and better, Jane, that's all." His grin was rapscallion. "My latest inspiration came one day as I pruned the pines back there and fell off the

ladder.”

“Oh, and what happened?”

“I fell through a surprise. You never quite know what you have in your own backyard, what you have missed over the years.”

I was going to ask about the strange small building behind the back gate, but Jack turned abruptly and walked briskly out of the garden. We had duck pie for dinner instead of lunch. I had learned nothing of his secret.

It is a long drive to Boston and I stewed every millisecond of the way. At times, my supervision of the highway strip glazed over to the image of the bonsai I had seen, trees of God, trees of whatever unnatural and impossible realm, but he had grown them all. I hadn’t taken a single picture, although my camera had been in my bag. The beltway grew dimmer as I swept through the Quabbin boundary, only to see each shadow of a tree above the roadway as an extension of bonsai. But then who came first, the walrus or the tusk? “Dare I Jane?” I asked myself. “Yes.” So I pulled off the beltway in Fitchburg and spent the rest of the night at the Ramada Inn, dreaming of hollow bonsai you could live in.

Morning came with rain and the expected bad breakfast. Coffee cleared the fog and brought back the urgency to photograph Jack’s to liven up the International Bonsai Gazette. Now, duck or no duck, I was back on the beltway head away from Boston, my body pumping adrenalin.

The dog didn’t bark this time. She lifted her head sympathetically and put it down again on her paws, looking the other way. The first gate was closed but not locked. I pushed it open a crack and slipped through. I was just as stunned this time—stunned because there was nothing much around, except for the tall pines that overhung the far gate and the building beyond. I prowled through the few remaining bonsai with awe and confusion. Where were all the bonsai? What had he pulled on me the day before? My eye fixed on the back gate and it was wide open. It led me to a wooden ramp that ascended almost to the second story of the skinny building, pine trunks rising on either side. At the top, the door was closed. It was a double door of the “swing-either-way” variety. I took a deep breath and swung through, my nostrils contracting at the sudden stench of ionization. Then I bumped into Jack and literally knocked him down.

“Damn,” he yelled, his eyes cold cobalt, “Get out. This is not your place, not yours or your society’s.”

I must have gone cross-eyed from the shock. When I refocused, it was beyond Jack. I was at ground level now, staring out at all the familiar bonsai in another garden, a narrow one with yellow walls set like cliffs. Nearby, I spied the engulfing maple. The last quartz crystal was gone beneath the roots. My eyes refocused on Jack and my mouth began to open.

“No, leave.”

The only proper thing to do was exit, so I did—but not without breaking a few branches as I staggered through the first garden.

I was sixty-four then. Jack and his bonsai disappeared almost immediately, along with the garden fences and the greenhouses and the wooden ramp. I am now sixty-five, sane, important, and still confused. I should not be intimidated by an old grouch who lived in a broken down farm and grew fat bonsai. My lawyers are trying to purchase this abandoned property. After all, I lost my husband years ago and never had any children, so I do have the time to play with more bonsai. Besides, if I can find the right bathtub hiding in the pines, I might just stumble onto duck pie again.

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The Bonsai Journal

This site is a response to several websites being removed from the Web, depriving enthusiasts of consequential and inspiring articles and galleries.

The articles that appear here were once featured in The Bonsai Enthusiast Journal, Bonsai Today Online Journal, and Bonsai Village.net.

Additional articles will appear here periodically, as I have time to prepare and publish them.
—Andy