



LIVING WHOLE ONLINE  
Health & Healing Courses

## Asphodel, That Greeny Flower [excerpt] by William Carlos Williams

Of asphodel, that greeny flower,  
    like a buttercup  
                                upon its branching stem-  
save that it's green and wooden-  
    I come, my sweet,  
                                to sing to you.

We lived long together  
    a life filled,  
                                if you will,  
with flowers. So that  
    I was cheered  
                                when I came first to know  
that there were flowers also  
    in hell.

                                Today  
I'm filled with the fading memory of those flowers  
    that we both loved,  
                                even to this poor  
colorless thing-  
    I saw it  
                                when I was a child-  
little prized among the living  
    but the dead see,  
                                asking among themselves:  
What do I remember  
    that was shaped  
                                as this thing is shaped?  
while our eyes fill  
    with tears.

                                Of love, abiding love  
it will be telling  
    though too weak a wash of crimson  
                                colors it  
to make it wholly credible.





There is something  
something urgent  
I have to say to you  
and you alone  
but it must wait  
while I drink in  
the joy of your approach,  
perhaps for the last time.

And so  
with fear in my heart  
I drag it out  
and keep on talking  
for I dare not stop.  
Listen while I talk on  
against time.

It will not be  
for long.  
I have forgot  
and yet I see clearly enough  
something  
central to the sky  
which ranges round it.

An odor  
springs from it!  
A sweetest odor!  
Honeysuckle! And now  
there comes the buzzing of a bee!  
and a whole flood  
of sister memories!


Only give me time,  
time to recall them  
before I shall speak out.

Give me time,  
time.


When I was a boy  
I kept a book  
to which, from time  
to time,

I added pressed flowers  
until, after a time,  
I had a good collection.  
The asphodel,  
forebodingly,  
among them.







I bring you,  
reawakened,  
a memory of those flowers.  
They were sweet  
when I pressed them  
and retained  
something of their sweetness  
a long time.  
It is a curious odor,  
a moral odor,  
that brings me  
near to you.  
The color  
was the first to go.  
There had come to me  
a challenge,  
your dear self,  
mortal as I was,  
the lily's throat  
to the hummingbird!  
Endless wealth,  
I thought,  
held out its arms to me.  
A thousand tropics  
in an apple blossom.  
The generous earth itself  
gave us lief.  
The whole world  
became my garden!  
But the sea  
which no one tends  
is also a garden  
when the sun strikes it  
and the waves  
are wakened.  
I have seen it  
and so have you  
when it puts all flowers  
to shame.  
Too, there are the starfish  
stiffened by the sun  
and other sea wrack  
and weeds. We knew that  
along with the rest of it  
for we were born by the sea,  
knew its rose hedges  
to the very water's brink.







There the pink mallow grows  
and in their season  
strawberries  
and there, later,  
we went to gather  
the wild plum.  
I cannot say  
that I have gone to hell  
for your love  
but often  
found myself there  
in your pursuit.  
I do not like it  
and wanted to be  
in heaven. Hear me out.  
Do not turn away.  
I have learned much in my life  
from books  
and out of them  
about love.  
Death  
is not the end of it.  
There is a hierarchy  
which can be attained,  
I think,  
in its service.  
Its guerdon  
is a fairy flower;  
a cat of twenty lives.  
If no one came to try it  
the world  
would be the loser.  
It has been  
for you and me  
as one who watches a storm  
come in over the water.  
We have stood  
from year to year  
before the spectacle of our lives  
with joined hands.  
The storm unfolds.  
Lightning  
plays about the edges of the clouds.





The sky to the north  
is placid,  
blue in the afterglow  
as the storm piles up.  
It is a flower  
that will soon reach  
the apex of its bloom.  
We danced,  
in our minds,  
and read a book together.  
You remember?  
It was a serious book.  
And so books  
entered our lives.  
The sea! The sea!  
Always  
when I think of the sea  
there comes to mind  
the Iliad  
and Helen's public fault  
that bred it.  
Were it not for that  
there would have been  
no poem but the world  
if we had remembered,  
those crimson petals  
spilled among the stones,  
would have called it simply  
murder.  
The sexual orchid that bloomed then  
sending so many  
disinterested  
men to their graves  
has left its memory  
to a race of fools  
or heroes  
if silence is a virtue.  
The sea alone  
with its multiplicity  
holds any hope.  
The storm  
has proven abortive  
but we remain  
after the thoughts it roused  
to  
re-cement our lives.





the mind  
                    It is the mind  
                    that must be cured  
                    short of death's  
intervention,  
                    and the will becomes again  
                    a garden. The poem  
is complex and the place made  
                    in our lives  
                    for the poem.  
Silence can be complex too,  
                    but you do not get far  
                    with silence.  
Begin again.  
                    It is like Homer's  
                    catalogue of ships:  
it fills up the time.  
                    I speak in figures,  
                    well enough, the dresses  
you wear are figures also,  
                    we could not meet  
                    otherwise. When I speak  
of flowers  
                    it is to recall  
                    that at one time  
we were young.  
                    All women are not Helen,  
                    I know that,  
but have Helen in their hearts.  
                    My sweet,  
                    you have it also, therefore  
I love you  
                    and could not love you otherwise.  
                    Imagine you saw  
a field made up of women  
                    all silver-white.  
                    What should you do  
but love them?  
                    The storm bursts  
                    or fades! it is not  
the end of the world.





Love is something else,  
or so I thought it,  
a garden which expands,  
though I knew you as a woman  
and never thought otherwise,  
until the whole sea  
has been taken up  
and all its gardens.

It was the love of love,  
the love that swallows up all else,  
a grateful love,  
a love of nature, of people,  
of animals,  
a love engendering  
gentleness and goodness  
that moved me  
and that I saw in you.

I should have known,  
though I did not,  
that the lily-of-the-valley  
is a flower makes many ill  
who whiff it.

We had our children,  
rivals in the general onslaught.  
I put them aside  
though I cared for them.  
as well as any man  
could care for his children  
according to my lights.

You understand  
I had to meet you  
after the event  
and have still to meet you.

Love  
to which you too shall bow  
along with me-  
a flower  
a weakest flower  
shall be our trust  
and not because  
we are too feeble  
to do otherwise  
but because  
at the height of my power  
I risked what I had to do,





therefore to prove  
that we love each other  
while my very bones sweated  
that I could not cry to you  
in the act.  
Of asphodel, that greeny flower,  
I come, my sweet,  
to sing to you!  
My heart rouses  
thinking to bring you news  
of something  
that concerns you  
and concerns many men. Look at  
what passes for the new.  
You will not find it there but in  
despised poems.  
It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.  
Hear me out  
for I too am concerned  
and every man  
who wants to die at peace in his bed  
besides

