

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Horticultural Interruptus

Michael Armstrong.

Thomas sat on the terrace and thought about leaving his wife. It seemed silly – itch or no itch – to break-up a seven-year marriage because he wanted to mow lawns, but the thought would not die. He had considered mowing other lawns to sate his desire, but he knew Emma would smell it on him and he didn't want a confrontation. She'd laughed when he'd tried to discuss it with her; and when her mocking laughter had died, she'd whispered that he'd have 'all the lawn he wanted' when her mother recovered. Then she'd pecked him on the cheek like some old aunt.

Thomas heard the familiar sound of hard rubber on brick paving and he adjusted his chair so that he could see over the perimeter fence into the cottage next door. He had never seen the young woman cutting her lawn and assumed she'd paid to have it done. They'd never spoken, only waved when their cars met on the street. Her lawn was thick and lush, but Thomas knew the interval since its last cut had been too long. An injudicious cut would expose the immature foliage just above the surface, and the sun would burn the lawn brown before sunset. Thomas watched her bend over the lawnmower and tug ferociously at the starter cord; she'd forgotten to give it a prime. He winced, collected the newspaper from the table and pretended to read. Moans and inaudible curses drifted across the fence, and when a loud 'shit' cut the air and Thomas dropped his newspaper, the girl was staring at him.

Thomas often had Sunday mornings to himself. He'd sit, upright, on a wrought iron chair, the walls hiding him from the street and the morning sun shining down so that he could close his eyes and let it warm his face. The Sunday newspaper would rest on a wrought iron table, unread: a coaster for his lukewarm coffee. It had been three years since he and Emma had moved into the townhouse. And it was three years and a day since he'd given the lawnmower a run.

Their townhouse was paved, front and rear. The only vegetation was shrubbery along the edge of the driveway and the succulents and roses in terracotta pots parallel to the balustrade that cordoned off the terrace from the French doors to the living room. The terrazzo floors, the heavy wrought iron furniture, the Santorini scenes painted on the courtyard walls by Emma's art teacher, the old door that reminded her of Florence, the formal shrubs and pert roses: it was an amalgam of Emma's fantasies about herself. None of it pleased Thomas, so he often sat outside, closed his eyes, and pretended he was somewhere else. He thought the terrace was manufactured and sterile, and, of course, it was. The wife of a colleague at Emma's work knew a great landscaper and he'd designed and constructed the terrace in two weeks after they'd moved in. Emma said it was sleek and chic.

Thomas had argued strongly against 'the move', but Emma rejected his superior reasoning without the hint of rebuttal. She disagreed and did what she always did: organised their lives and presented Thomas with *faits accomplis*. He never knew whether he was angry at her stunning hubris or at his sulky impotence.

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He knew Emma had hated the lawns that surrounded their old home in the suburbs. He knew when she'd silently railed against his fertiliser, lawn seed or mower-oil purchases that it had nothing to do with their finances. She'd hated that Thomas cared for the lawn, how he had gently laid new seed and top-dressed in the spring, fertilised religiously in the summer, and cheated when there were water restrictions. It seemed to her that he loved the garden more than he loved her – if he loved her at all.

But Emma didn't understand *how* Thomas loved. His wasn't simply an aesthetic appreciation. Love, to him, was physical, too. A real garden couldn't be planned and constructed in a few weeks. It had to be natural, laborious; you had to get your hands dirty.

Rarely had a day at their new townhouse passed without Thomas thinking about his horticultural pursuits in the suburbs. Mostly, he missed mowing the grass; and often, usually on Sunday mornings, his mind would be consumed by the gentle curves of the lawns that sloped away from the old house. A lawn-cutting day usually began with a check of the fluid levels and a delicate prime to get the juice flowing. Then he'd pull firmly on the starter and the lawnmower would come to life like a feral cat, spitting and screaming. He loved the strain on his muscles as he humped it up the incline of their block, and the throbbing vibrations of the engine as it kept a steady rhythm until he was done. He even enjoyed the hot and sweaty days when he thought he'd collapse from the heat, and the relief at the end when his body was bombarded with endorphins. Then he'd have a smoke or a beer and sit in the shade and look out at the green, satisfied he'd created something beautiful out of the wild. And it *was* beautiful, like Emma when they'd first met at university.

When Emma first showed her disdain for horticulture, Thomas thought she was bored with his gardening routine. He thought about buying some bulbs or taking her to a wildflower exhibition, something different to get her interested again. During their courtship, he'd assumed she'd liked what he'd liked: she'd accompanied him to the hardware store and the nursery; she'd helped him mulch the pubescent palms in the courtyard of his old flat; and she'd never once questioned his gardening expenditure. But after a few years of marriage, he realised she had reverted to the anti-horticulturist she'd been before they'd met. Before they'd married, he hadn't asked if she'd liked lawns or gardening, so her deceit, although wicked, was not impeachable.

They'd moved into the townhouse at Emma's insistence: her mother was sick and Emma wanted to be close to the hospital in the city. Yet, Emma never seemed to visit Mrs Sharp with greater frequency once they'd moved.

His cold coffee often made him think of Emma enjoying her Sunday morning rituals. He had been once or twice – at her insistence – and had scrutinised the sermons and the tea-sipping afterwards. All the little fingers were in the air and the frocked one nodded sagely at anyone who said anything. It seemed he thought his piety was increased by the light steps he took and the firm pats he gave to the padded shoulders that surrounded him. At dinner parties with Emma's friends, Thomas often made some excuse and went home early without her. None of her friends seemed to think it strange for a man to leave without his wife. Maybe they knew her as well as he did. At Christmas and birthdays, he sat in a corner, drank scotch with Emma's father and compared notes about their spouses.

'Do you know anything about lawnmowers?' the young woman asked, and Thomas put the newspaper on the table.

For two hours, Thomas mowed Lola's lawn, trimmed her edges, mulched her poinsettias and fertilised her eggplant and tomato vines. He taught her to prune, showed her how to use newspaper to keep her beds moist, and he made a net out of old stockings to stop the birds ravaging her seedlings. She seemed to enjoy the morning as much as Thomas, and he agreed to help her every Sunday morning. By twelve o'clock, he had showered, shaved and deodorised, and his incriminating clothes had been washed and were hanging on the line in the rear courtyard.

When Emma walked through the front door, the scent of freshly cut grass followed her into the house and Thomas panicked; he was certain she'd smell it on him. But Emma said nothing. She smiled, walked through the French doors and sat on the terrace. She lit a cigarette, even though she rarely smoked, and stared at the park across the road, her gaze fixed and the smile on her lips fading.

An hour later, Emma came downstairs after her shower and the scent had gone.