

The Nature of Things

by Wendy Russ

She couldn't see what was actually there—the landscaping. All she could see were dollar signs, thousands of them suspended in mid-air, floating over each new plant, each well-placed sprinkler head, every curve of terraced orderliness on the hillside.

She blinked and adjusted her eyes to the sunlight, trying to focus on what made him proud. He eased up silently behind her and said, “Do you think it's beautiful?” She knew it was important to him that she think it so.

“Oh yes, of course. It's lovely,” she said. And that was the truth. She could see it was beautiful when she could see beyond the money he'd spent.

The new money. The money he'd never had before. His money, not hers, not really.

The plants were well-arranged, well-planned, like an army strategically poised to launch an attack on the bare hillside, to occupy it, to obliterate it with firebursts of color and a massive proliferation of exotic greenery.

He had spent days consulting with the landscape architect, describing to him in detail what type of beauty he liked in landscaping—how it should lay just so, how it should take this much water, how it should bloom in stages, how some sections should bear fruit, how some were just for show. It was well-reasoned and the landscape architect nodded enthusiastically in agreement at the prospect of this intelligent client's new challenge.

Oh yes, and for her there should be one small spot where she could put anything she wanted, whatever plant she picked. This small

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section would be hers to nurture, to design. Her place to be fertile.

She knew immediately what her plant would be—a nasturtium, an orange one. She loved their airiness, the lightness of them. Orange trumpet flowers on a bed of leaves that reminded her of lily pads. The slightest breeze made them dance. She became happy just to look at them as they spread themselves, proliferated, and made life out of nearly nothing.

She planted the nasturtium while he was out, planted it near the edge of the patio by the swimming pool. In its natural state the vines fell gently over the hard line of the concrete, creating a lace edging, softening it. She sat for a long time and looked at it once she was done patting the dirt in firmly around it.

That's where he found her—sitting in a chair on the patio watching her new plant. He stood beside her and remarked on its boldness—how it verged across the line onto the paving around the pool.

She nodded in agreement, misunderstanding his remark as a compliment to the nasturtium.

“This won't do,” he added more firmly.

“It'll be fine. We can trim that edge.”

“But it will creep in other directions. It will creep everywhere. It will take over and spread into the other plants. It will ruin the plan. You must trim it. Trim it into a ball, you know, like this.” To illustrate, he made the shape of a basketball with his hands.

“You can't trim a nasturtium into a ball. It's not a shrub. It's a vine; it's beautiful. Can't you see it?”

“It will take over. It will become a mess.” His voice became tight and his face drawn and firm. She had learned over the years that his insistence would turn into anger when she did not submit to what he thought was simple logic and reason.

One plant, one corner. He promised.

“I can trim it. I'll make sure it doesn't go too wild. You can't trim it into a ball. It will be ruined. That's not its nature.” It was obvious he could not see it—that the force of his desire did not change the reality of what the nasturtium was. She felt the harsh whisper of defeat on the back of her neck, teasing her.

In the coming days she'd sit with garden shears, her back to the French doors of their master bedroom. She'd whisper to the nasturtium suggestions to grow here and there, but not here and certainly not there. She'd trim selectively, organically, and never let it grow out across the patio. She'd correct its eagerness with shears when it ran to greet its bedmates. All the while she could feel him watching her, spreading his disapproval like a dark fog rolling down an unsettled, looming mountain.

But it was this thing between them. When they ate dinner, the nasturtium was there. At each lap in the pool it was there. At night when the lights went out in the bedroom, the nasturtium was there between them in all its wildness and uncontrolled verve. She could sense it maddened him like an invisible splinter he could only pick at, but never find.

Sometimes he went out to the new landscaping with tools and gardening gloves and pretend to work. He'd pat at the mulch, touch the leaves as if to inspect them. He'd check the sprinkler heads to make sure nothing was clogged. He kept his back to the nasturtium, always, his lips a tight, thin line.

To assuage him, on grocery-shopping day she came home with many of his favorites. She found him sitting at the counter with his gardening gloves and shears.

She laid out all the lovely things to show him—his sardines, the fresh pineapple, a stone-baked sprouted wheat bread still hot from the oven. And last, she showed him the foul cheese she got, the limburger, his favorite that she despised more than anything.

For a change he seemed content, soothed. She asked him, “Have you been working in the garden again?”

He nodded. “I have. I tidied some things up.”

“And how is it?”

He smiled and said, “Finally, it's perfect.”

She walked to the glass door and looked to the edge of the patio at the nasturtium whose delicate limbs he had overpowered and shaped into the form he wanted—a tidy ball, a thing obedient to his desires.

She stepped out onto the patio and made a final glance toward him. Still at the counter, his back relaxed, he idly pushed the groceries around into a line. She reached down, grasped the nasturtium firmly and tugged, pulling it up by the roots. She left the hole, not bothering to pack the dirt down, then dropped the butchered plant into the garbage can and made her way back to the house.

