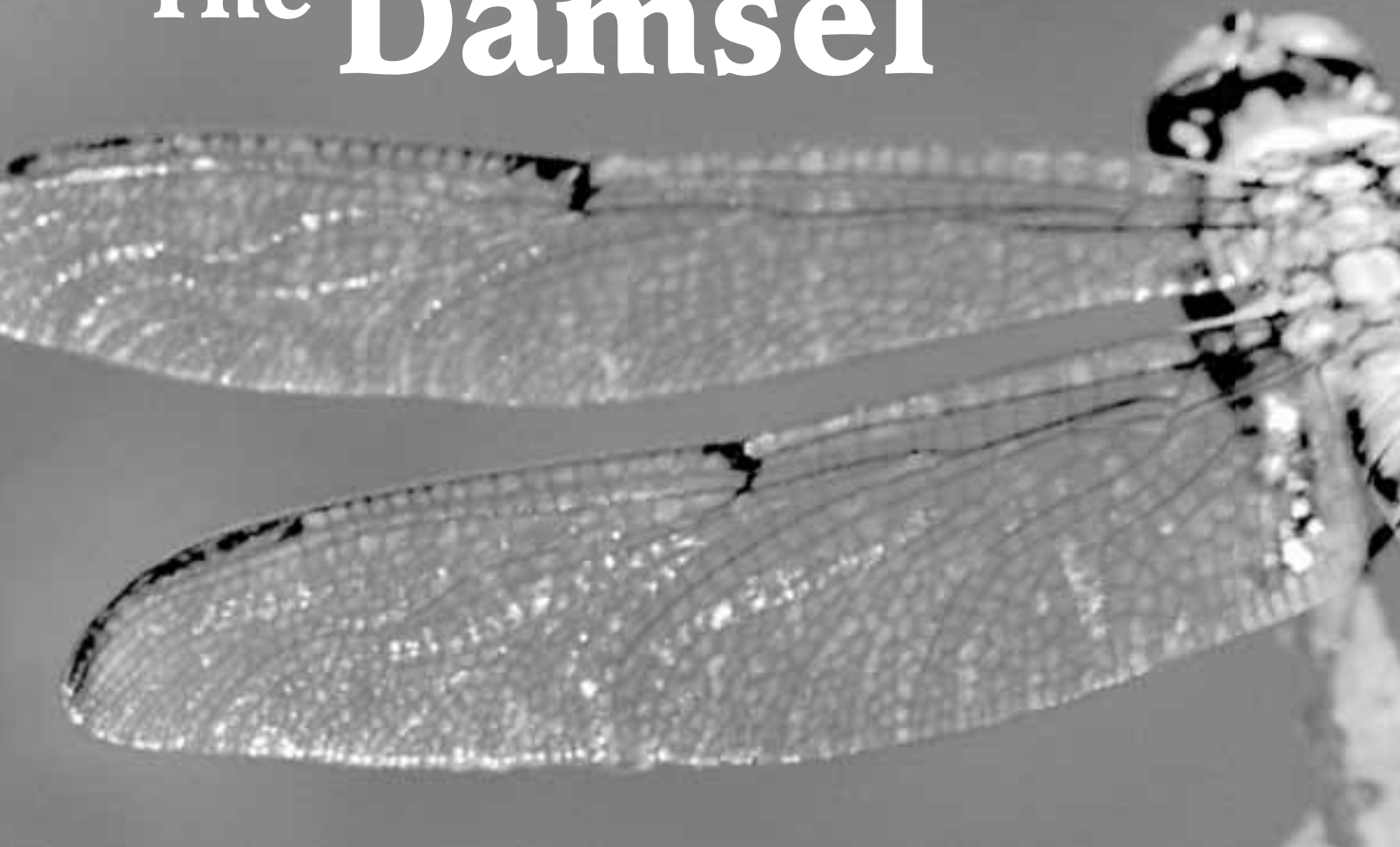


The Damsel



There is a soft, murmuring sound distracting me from my hoeing. It is brilliantly sunny, so it cannot be a splash of raindrops on polythene. The sound seems to be coming from inside the polythene greenhouse, the temperature in here is soaring. It has to be 100° and the sweat is rolling into my eyes. As I mop my brow, my line of vision is drawn up to the arch of the tunnel and I discover the origin of the rhythmic pat-pat-pat sound. Near the supporting bars I see a dragonfly, an orange brown body, most likely a four-spotted chaser. And not far from the dragonfly my eyes alight on the damsel. This damsel has brilliant, Technicolor blue stripes. The Irish damselfly is more often

found north of the border in Armagh and Fermanagh, but this one has apparently migrated to West Cavan where I live.

The Dragon and Damsel are united in my tropically warm polytunnel on this unseasonably warm June afternoon. Without doubt they have been drawn by the drainage ditches that form minicanals to run off accumulated water from the torrential showers that blow in on the Gulf Stream.

These days I work on the land. Or rather, the land works me. The polytunnel is weather-shielded — a guaranteed access to grubbing in the dirt even when it is pouring outside. I even have a nail to hook my rain jacket just beside the front door. In

this protected environment I have a routine: one of germinating, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting.

Here in the west of Ireland, soil is the god and goddess to be worshipped. It is cherished because it is so thin; we garden on partially-drained peat bog and soggy meadow. We compost vigorously. Homemade compost is essential to feeding the vegetable beds and a two-person household doesn't generate a lot of vegetable waste. But our problem is our local grocer's solution. He bags up all his "past-the-sell-by-date" vegetables and my husband Tony collects them for me.

I layer these gifts with cardboard, waste paper, and any other green matter I can get my hands on. In

& the Dragonfly

How Gardening
Restored My Soul

early spring and autumn, you will find me walking down our roadside hedge. I'll tug out whips of bramble from the hedge, meticulously scateur those eight-foot-long switches into one-inch pieces which will then go into my wheelbarrell and back to the compost.

And there's more: I occasionally don thick rubber gloves and look for stinging nettles. When I find them I pull them up, lop off the roots, and throw the leaves on the heap. The roots go into a barrel where they macerate with the roots of other weeds — scutch grass, creeping buttercup, field buttercup, thistle, and bramble. This becomes the magic mix, a liquid plant food. Tomatoes thrive on it, and we use

it as a compost activator when there is too much brown, carboniferous matter going into the heap. We are fortunate enough to live next door to a cattle farmer, and in the autumn he provides us with well-rotted manure to add to the beds before they get mulched up for the winter.

Once almost barren, West Cavan had a reputation for “bad land” which was only good for grazing cattle. The country is pretty waterlogged; it is not for nothing that County Cavan is said to have a lake for every day of the year. But with conscious care and stewardship, our particular corner of Ireland is becoming productive, in both organic vegetables and in organic beef and lamb. One advantage of

using polytunnels to grow our crops is that hares, badgers, and foxes can prowl our shared territory, but the plants remain protected.

It's this proximity to the tunnel's drainage channel that has attracted Dragonfly and Damsel. Somehow they have taken a wrong turn on an updraft, found their way through the polytunnel's door, and landed on the polythene sheeting.

Jamie Sams and David Carson¹ tell the story that Dragonfly used to be a dragon, but was lured by Coyote to shapeshift into an insect, and then got caught in that shape forever. This dragon is partnered by a damsel, seemingly not distressed, but definitely in need of a few signposts back to the stream.

Cloak of Stars

Cool breezes whisper greetings
Soft grass caresses bare feet
Voices rise and fall

We breathe with the Mother.
We breathe with the Earth.

Trees vibrate and hum
joining with our voices.
Our feet dance the old patterns
spiraling in and out
as the lights of the heavens
spiral with us.

Stretched across the velvety darkness
we wrap ourselves
in the Cloak of Stars.

We breathe with the Mother.
We breathe with the Earth
and are one with all things.

— Brianna Wallace

I pay attention to the animals that show up in my life. Early in spring, which this year was especially cold, half of our chicken flock was decimated by mink. The mink used to be farmed around here, and (according to who is telling you the story) they were either released by animal rights activists or by the fur farmers themselves when the market for fur coats tanked. Either way, they have been following the Shannon River and they pounced on our free-ranging hens as they returned to their coop.

Not long before the mink had their natural (but vicious) encounter with the hens, I had experienced what felt like a particularly nasty psychic assault. The mink taught me to create secure boundaries — for the physical safety of the hens and, metaphorically, for my own psychological safety.

So here are the Dragon and the Damsel taking a detour through my tightly-controlled environment. What do they have to say to me? Why are the Dragon and its mythological partner, the Damsel, together? While I am pondering this my husband appears, sizes up the situation, and fretting that the insects may get stuck in the tunnel, goes to open the back entrance.

In a time of deep psychic discontent, working the Earth has renewed my sense of balance. The hoeing, sowing, watching, and growing have soothed my anger and my feelings of betrayal. I had come to distrust my own instincts, yet now I am developing a close relationship with these plants based on those very instincts. They respond well when I listen to the spiritual guidance that tells me what plant needs more food, less water, less mulch, more air. Perhaps the dragonfly and the damselfly are telling me that it is time to let go of the past. Perhaps

they are saying that it has been chopped up and put in the compost heap and is decomposing nicely.

I know one thing: this particular summer is doing well. My greenhouse is trumpeting yellow flowers from the zucchini plants, the tomatoes are flowering, and Danu, the Irish land Goddess, is rewarding me for my stewardship of the acre in my care. I am developing my own form of circadian rhythm and a previously unknown sense of harmony. Who would have thought that I, a thorough-going urbanite, without an agrarian ancestor on her family tree, would suddenly find such peace in horticulture.

My new intimacy with earth has made me more physically fit and increasingly more mentally and spiritually fit as well. There is great sanity in the ground. There is no greater ritual than saluting the sun and acknowledging gratefully what the earth has nurtured overnight. In this stewardship role I am beginning to feel that I am co-creating with Goddess. It is a conversational relationship with the Divine, where each day we listen carefully to the other and, in synchrony, act together in true harmony.

ENDNOTE

¹ David Carson and Jamie Sands, *Medicine Cards*, Bear & Co., Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1988. ©

— Goddess had the power to accomplish SageWoman columnist BEE SMITH's dream of moving her partner, two canine companions, and feline household goddess to Ireland. They salute Slievenakilla of the Iron Mountains each morning and bow to the River Shannon each evening.