
Arborified

TESSA RANSFORD

JULIA TOLD me she worshipped trees. We were walking through Harvard Yard under the spreading elms on the way back from the Widener Library to her tiny apartment on Massachusetts Avenue. It was October 1981 and I was staying with Julia, having met her in Scotland only a few months earlier, when she was visiting her friend Dr. Emily Lyle at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh's George Square.

Hence the title.* Baum is "tree" in German while Flora, flower, is the goddess of spring and desire, with her gardens, five gardens, like the star at the heart of an apple, or the fifth constituting that which subsumes the other four: "the fifth, the final garden is the garden of the whole," writes Julia in her introduction. The five books, bound with green linen covers and gold lettering on the spines, are poem-gardens. Though numbered, they were not written and do not need to be read sequentially. Time is *kairos*, the now-time, spiralling and patterned. "The subject of the poem is desire," wrote Julia in 1991 in "Query Re One's Work," a short essay on her work. "The poem itself is desired," and she quotes Rilke (also a poet of gardens and trees): "*Ach die Gärten bist du, / ach ich sah sie mit solcher / Hoffnung.*" Book one is centered around the Tree of Life and book five around the Tree of Knowledge. In between are the books of Beauty, Truth and Goodness.

* Julia Budenz, *The Gardens of Flora Baum* (Chelmsford, Massachusetts: Carpathia Press, 2011). Five volumes, 2,254 pages, hardcover, \$175. Book One, *By the Tree of Life*; Book Two, *Towards a Greek Garden*; Book Three, *Rome*; Book Four, *Towards Farthest Thule*; Book Five, *By the Tree of Knowledge*.

Born on May 23, 1934 in New York City, Julia died in Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 11, 2010, her work almost finished, most of it digitized and proofed for final publication, then posthumously edited by Emily Lyle. Her life was her work, and it is strangely impossible to imagine her living after it was finished. Julia was nine years an Ursuline nun before leaving to study and then to write. The habits of perfection and devotion were not cast aside. She joined the convent after graduating and took a further degree, beginning to teach classics while still with the Ursulines. After leaving the convent in 1966, Julia took a degree in comparative literature (Greek, Latin, and English) at Harvard, before turning to creative work in the light of her scholarship and vision.

I first encountered Julia's work in the form of the poem "The Lay of The Last Monk" which begins book four, written mostly in Scotland and described by her as the book of "the good" which "blooms with human relations." I read it in Edinburgh in Duncan Glen's magazine, *Akros* (vol. 12, no. 36), in 1977. Nature, passion, intellect, life-fire are in every line.

The ruined Cistercian Abbey in Melrose spreads beside the River Tweed at the foot of the three fairy Eildon Hills, where Julia has Anthea, a moon-goddess, meeting an inquisitive monk in what is an echo of Thomas the Rhymer's encounter and sojourn with the Queene of Faerie. And the poem closes with tranquil beauty:

Honey columns of stone rise on the slope
 In the rose of dawn. White silence and rainbow song
 Alternate in the air. A swan from the north
 Shakes his cold wings by the laurel in the southern sun.
 Walls are down. Paths are radiant.

The death of Julia's mother in 2002 occasioned an entry in *The Diary of Flora Baum*, a long sequence covering many years, which concludes book four. Julia's father—when she was eleven years old, an age for the onset of discrimina-

tion—was dramatically converted from being a staunch Communist to Roman Catholicism. For Epiphany 2004, we have a sense of the transfigurative experience of taking vows:

The marriage, the chapel, the chant, the Latin,
The candle, the banquet, the sacrifice were facts
Acting, dazzling, entrancing together . . .

Ending with:

The heart's Latin lasts forever.

But “Mother never got used to the Catholic Church. / She shook her head. / It's a weed, she said.” In support, Flora Baum writes: “Ideals, and not ideologies / . . . / Rhythms, rather than rigidities” (July 28, 2005).

Again and again, the poems take the form of repeated interrogatives, twisting and turning the verbal patterns, structured and patterned, like nature itself, in an intricate parallel, a knitting of life and learning. “I felt bare. / I felt broken. / . . . / I felt tired. / I felt tried” (Feb. 15, 2007). The bleak desperation of these four lines shows the skill with which Julia can turn a phrase for any effect she wants. Ultima Thule, Shetland, the longed-for paradise to be regained, is the land of unfading light: “I seek the good and not the god in Thule,” (May 20 2005); but “Through cold too cold a sun shines bright, shines blithe. / The grammar will come up, and then the logic, / The rhetoric, and then the poetry” (February 15, 2004).

Emily Lyle arranged for me to meet Julia at the home of William and Norah Montgomerie. William was editor of *Lines Review* at that time, and published poems by Julia, which also appeared in *Chapman* magazine. I had begun to organize The School of Poets, for critical and informative feedback. Julia came to one of our meetings and was excited by it. It was at such a time of heightened consciousness that my first visit to America to stay with Julia took place. I was also beginning to conceive and develop the idea of a Scottish Poetry Library. In Cambridge, I not only benefitted from Ju-

lia, her commitment and erudition, but also from her circle of lively, intellectual women friends. I returned to Edinburgh with ideas and hopes I could never have entertained without that input.

It is apparent that Flora Baum was created by Julia as her heroic self, her alter ego, a persona for her inner being, whom she conducted on an Odyssean pilgrimage in search of the absolutes and archetypes to which experience can only approximate. Julia's daily life in the mundane became a support system for Flora's journey. They support and encourage one another:

Are we, are we then, you and I?
Are we, are we not, I and I?

(March 13, 2003)

And:

I tried
To forbid
Her to brood
And to dread.
If my author could
Be less dismayed
I might be less horrified,
Might dream of being glorified,
Might find myself as finally florified,
Arborified.

(July 10, 2001)

As the mortal Julia fades into old age and faces death, the underlying hope is that the eternal Flora will strengthen and flourish. Steeped as Julia was in the classics, she also understood the depths and richness of the ballad tradition through her friendship with Emily Lyle, who edited the Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection in eight volumes and founded the Traditional Cosmology Society. The resulting interweaving of these two strands gives Julia's poetry a unique resonance.

To return to book one: we have a quotation from Isaac Newton as preface, and it is notable that Julia worked as a

researcher in medieval and early Latin scientific texts for the pioneering Harvard historian of science and Newton scholar, I. Bernard Cohen.

Resistance is usually ascrib'd to bodies at rest, and impulse to those in motion: But motion and rest, as commonly conceived, are only relatively distinguished; nor are those bodies always truly at rest, which commonly are taken to be so.

Book one deals with the leaving of the cloister in extraordinary language of yearning—with veil, ring, candle, and incense—for the lost promise of divine unity. In a gentle ballad we hear that “For nine long years she heard him call, / For nine years she was dumb.” Gradually adapting to the world outside took the form of turning “from life to life.” There is a sense of huge loss but also of space to seek again, this time in nature, especially trees. Movement in bodies at rest is characteristic of trees and so not for nothing is the title of book one “By the Tree of Life.” But the sense of emptiness after leaving the rituals of the cloister wasn’t easy to bear. “Why, when he went away, / did everything go?” Gradually treading the daily path, “up and down,” not going anywhere, “that same old path,” she felt something “infinitely else.” She felt, she became, at one with the Tree:

Layer after layer the branches rise,

Their motion and stillness contained in my eyes.

Soon I am one with the tree,

The one tree, which I will not lose.

And finding speech-forms for these profound but hard-won feelings is at the heart of Julia’s poetry, as she explains in “Statement” toward the end of part two of this book:

This book is not like a poem. The form

And the content are not one. In fact,

I give you only the form

Of the feeling.

With book two, we enter the intellectual rhapsody of ancient Greece, while still mainly walking in Cambridge. Julia was writing these poems at the time I visited her and we walked together on a pilgrimage to her hallowed trees around the city. Her poems name and exalt many kinds of tree: the oaks, the beech, the cedar, the virgilia, the catalpa, the plane, the ginko, the tulip tree, the sugar maple, the hawthorn, the locust tree, and more humbly the witch hazel and barberry bushes. But supreme among them all is the elm, especially a certain elm in Harvard Yard that was Julia's Apollo and Muse.

She saw the single, multitudinous elm.

The trunk with its primary branches
Is firm, is still. A motion inheres
In that stillness: all the growing, the upholding,
The struggle recorded in a stance—
Antaeus kept from the earth,
The discus almost hurled,
A slain god just arisen.

Julia, a shell without Flora, works in an office typing and filing, "like Antigone in the granite tomb." She drops Flora off for day-care in a garden on the way to work and is scarcely able to bend down and pick her up on the way home. Yet, through Flora, Julia has the strength of Ajax, the charisma of Achilles, the valor of Hector. She wants amazing adventures. She flies on a dragon. Julia asks the oracle at Delphi a question: "What great thing shall I do?" And she receives the answer, "Be your own prophet." "Is there a Greek garden?" she asks, but answers the question with her response to the mind's eye of beauty everywhere latent and apparent in Greece, and the temple of the sky replicated on earth. Yet in Greece the male hierarchies remain, the queens and goddesses forgotten. Flora protests: "*Le roi est mort. Vive la reine. / Le le est mort. Vive la la.*" Woman is still ignored, dubbed a girl, pushed into oblivion while:

Father Zeus. Father O'Flaherty.
Father il Papa. Pater noster.
Father George Washington. Uncle Sam.
Uncle Hades. Father Freud.
Pater Omnipotens Deus. By Jupiter . . .

After poems of pattern, description, repetition, story, emotion, and gentle mockery, book two culminates in a formulation about possession and desire: "that desire," the desire that keeps the poet restless, the prophet never satisfied, nature ever seeking new forms, the woman ever fertile in works of creation, a desire "Like something almost possessed, / Restful and never at rest."

When we come to book three we are in the realm of the true, which Julia claims is pivotal. She desired to feel but became absorbed in literary research, mainly the letters and writings of Cicero and Virgil. She quotes Lydus, at the beginning of the section called "Urbiculture": "The city has three names: secret, sacred, and civic. The secret name is Amor or Desire . . . ; the sacred name is Flora, or flowering . . . ; the civic name is Roma." The task Julia set herself of integrating these three aspects is mindboggling. Reading the first half of this book gives the impression that Julia was a hard taskmaster for poor Flora, who was expected to ingest a huge amount of detail in narratives, interpretations, histories, and personal encounters with figures past and present, fictional and historical. Julia had residencies at the Bellagio Study and Conference Centre and at the American Academy in Rome. It is almost as if the easier life became for Julia, the harder it became for Flora—she was overworked; indeed "Flora wept." But Julia said: "If you / Are a student you have no right to tears." And brilliant though they are, the poems, mainly pentameters, are overworked too. Julia herself writes that this is the book of "academic knowledge, of scholarship, of learning" and marks "a difficult struggle to pass through pedantry to erudition and insight." Flora though states clearly: "This is a metered thesis, not a poem. / This is a dissertation, not a work / Of art. This lusts for truth, not beauty."

The tragic story of the betrayal of Cicero is dominant in the first part, writing in exile:

*I've lost
Not just my possessions,
Not only my family and friends,
But my self.*

Virgil's *Eclogues* pervade the second part, and Thalia, the muse of pastoral poetry and all that flourishes, is seen playing with Flora in a happy passage describing the essence of play. The days of Floralia are celebrated. The month of May however brings an aside:

Why did we always hate the Virgin Mary—
We Catholic American virgins exhorted to love her?
She was the ivory Maiden Mother . . .
Her downcast eyes, her celibate priests
Urging us virgins to nurture her virtues
In girlish souls: silence, passivity,
Obedience, humility, belief.

In contrast, Julia “saw Apollo, Silvanus and Pan” and “did not panic,” writing, “for endless is desire / and Amor knows no moderation.” She declares, even as she explores the vestal virgins who spent decades within a binding vow, that Poverty for her is choosing the good, Obedience is submission to the true, and Chastity is rapture in the beautiful.

Minerva and Carmentis also appear with Horace, Dante, Petrarch, Galileo, and significantly Tasso, who befriends and encourages Julia / Flora, in the third part. She meets Milton and Edward Gibbon, the one who wrote of the Fall of Man and the other of the Fall of Rome, going back now and then to Longfellow and James Lowell with their leafy homes in Cambridge. Significantly, Virgil stands on the steps of the Widener Library, twitching his toga, and waiting for her:

Shall I deny that Virgil is my theme
As he induces blossoms from the dew

And sprinkles shade about the sleep-soft grass . . .

The Widener Library is declared to be Julia's love and spouse: "Widener, my spouse, my song opens to you." The Catholicism to which she dedicated herself as a young woman has now given place to a holy order of nature with which Julia wants to align her life; and trees especially, with their poise, their continuing renewal, growing and dying with the seasons, suggest to her a mode whereby, through Flora, she might become herself a priestess of nature. In this role, if it is achieved, she will have at heart the interests of all creation (see 5.259–60, for example). As the mortal Julia fades into old age and faces death, the underlying hope is that the eternal Flora Baum will strengthen and flourish.

Yet now, Julia was mentally and physically so entranced by her image of Virgil that he was vividly present to her and particularly so in the Widener Library where, by reading, she was able to converse with him, be in intercourse with him, sharing with him her innermost longings and aspirations while feeling that she received his encouragement and blessing. To sojourn in Rome will be liberation from the need to work, and Julia needs freedom to seek the truth that will set her free. The structural plan for book three is set out clearly:

Three is the tract on academic truth,
On the pedantic, on the classical,
On poetry as studied not as felt,
Literature as read not written, life
Lived in the cave, the grove, the beech's shadow.

But, she explains, it is at a cost:

The penalty of pedantry fell hard.
I was in love. My love was very deep.
I loved the deep high object of my songs.

A sequence of Petrarchan sonnets forms a section after *Arbor*. These are love poems to language and languages, to the Muses, to her calling as poet-prophetess. On television Julia sees Mandela walk free and writes, "O let me see, let me

complete my tune.” This remarkable tour de force of sonnets ends with “How shall I ever reach the Rome of truth?” and Julia has Flora tell her severely:

Julia Budenz, you are not Flora Baum.
Your story is a dying. Mine is life.
Your story is like night. Mine is the dawn.

Accepting that “the poet is the poetry” she also knows that “The work and not the person is the pearl. / The other self that lives outside the self, / The made and not the maker, is the jewel.” Another sequence of Roman Sonnets draws this long book to a close, in a continuation of sonnet “conversation.” Although neither modernist nor post-modernist, Julia is modern; not in awe of male poets or of the regulations set by feminist theory, Julia rigorously deconstructs language and gender, offers alternate endings, plays with personae and has a heroine who fears she will fail.

Death pervades book five as it accompanies Julia’s own decline, including a serious fall, followed by cancer, while existing in penury in a rented apartment. She is writing up to within ten days of her death, for

The trouble was
That it was such a love,
It was such a love
And it was such a choice
And such a being chosen.
It did not matter
That I was never worthy.
It did not matter,
For it was such a passion.

In order to deal with the perennial philosophical questions, the poem adopts a pattern of letters from Julia and her dream companion Flora to the nineteenth-century Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, who also created an imaginary soul-mate and savior, Leila. Julia writes to Margaret and Flora to Leila. Julia also occasionally signs herself Miriam,

the name she was given when she entered the convent on July 5, 1956, aged twenty-two. “Why does she remember with horror / What she once experienced with joy?” The poems are sometimes long lines of prose, sometimes four- or two-liners, varying in mood and content, always following the seasons, being dated, but not by year.

She bravely continues: “The poet’s words are only plays with words. / Dream on. The price for playing must be steep.” Several of the most vivid passages in book five describe Julia’s experiences in hospital. In her pain, she writes of knives already inside her body, so that there is no need for a knife for the sacrifice; and that there are plenty of knives also inside her mind. She identifies with Iphigenia. Flora asks Leila to help her help the ailing Julia recall her love and devotion to nature, which does not fail its worshippers. And Julia admits that it is Flora, both other and self, who is to be the sacrificial offering, like the head of Orpheus floating down the stream. Flora must outlast Julia’s “little day.”

Devastatingly, even her muse the elm tree is cut down. “The dead elm was hacked down and dragged away . . . I saw it and I saw by it. It fell.” And again addressing it in the same elegy she continues to grieve: “The tree fell like a wounded warrior . . . / Its spirit haunts the hades of my heart.” Those losses of faith first in Communism and then in Catholicism still haunt her: “Deus disintegrated. Saints dissolved. / The splinters and the drops lodged, lived, in me,” and she imagines Archangel Dawkins beckoning to a paradise of knowledge.

This last book tends to be closely autobiographical and there is too much in the interrogative. We follow painfully day by day as Julia reviews her life and the agonizing letting-go of her work of desire: “I dwelt with azure sky, I lived with God.” And “I dwell among the dead, I live with life.” And Flora writes of “the tremor of truth and burst of beauty” which is “the muse of all her days.”

The beech comes to the rescue: “At the edge of the spreading garden grows the beech. . . . So known, thus loved . . . ”

That spreading garden is indeed Julia's five-volume poem, *The Gardens of Flora Baum*, during the making of which she gradually becomes, as she describes, "arborified."

I am reminded of David Jones's poem *The Anathemata*, drawing on what he named "The Matter of Britain," which required René Hague to write his "Commentary." Julia's five-volume poem draws on the Matter of Greece, Rome, Britain, America, and could require many pages of commentary. Nevertheless, the poems should be enjoyed at the level of sensual response, understanding rather than analyzing. Julia is in the tradition of the Transcendentalists to some extent, in her respect for and attention to nature and in her idealism. She is influenced by the pastoral poems of the classical eras, Theocritus and Virgil, as well as by the questing passion of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson; yet she is also *sui generis* and has created her own medium for her own message.

I can still picture Julia (with Flora Baum intact) her long wavy hair, her long plaid skirt, walking the brick-laid paths of Harvard Yard, worshipping her elm tree and ever entering the embrace of the Widener Library for further intellectual rhapsody.