

# Jeffery Donaldson

## *Garden Variation*

An Epithalamion for Glen and Elizabeth Gill

Gardens can rise and fall through the seasons  
like a prow, fountains of water lunging  
on all sides ahead of their fresh breezes.

But there is a moment that the painter loved,  
in later August, so the story goes,  
at dusk, when blue still backs the gold leaf,

and before the sun's incandescent wick  
slips under the rim of the shallow bowl,  
when the air is opened like a decanter

and breathes and is poured out over the stone  
pools, still warm, and the faery lanterns  
that children bring glow like dimmed chandeliers.

And there is an arbour where amorists  
might lie down, and without which the garden  
would lack its metaphor of the nuptial canopy.

In June, the sunsets are garish, July's  
parched ferns nod in the haze, and September  
is too late for any number of reasons.

So he came back those evenings in August  
for the same twenty minutes, with the case  
of paints under his arm, and set to work.

And we may never know how many times,  
for that one scene, he returned to finish  
what he'd started, what menial tasks detained him

at the house, what single cloud mass sauntering  
through his sky at the pace of a hay wagon  
lengthened the days between his return visits,

what stretch of unlucky rains intervened  
in the given weeks, when he was all but ready,  
or indeed how many long winters passed

when the hard ground was jabbed with sticks  
and the bitter northerlies made  
any trip to the garden a waste of time.

And in the end, to judge by the painting,  
it might as easily have been winter  
there all year round, where the painter lived,

and never the best possible moment  
to go looking for the unfastened light  
full of serendipitous intention.

We really just have the story itself  
of *Natura Naturans*, the garden unfolding,  
as he called the final landscape that years

after was discovered among his works,  
the floating lanterns, the breathing air,  
the gold leaf, the lovers' nuptial arbour

and its short-lived gloaming, ephemera he loved  
so well he went back to get them right  
just for that once, more times than we will know.

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**Jeffery Donaldson** teaches poetry and American Literature at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. *Once Out of Nature* was published by McClelland & Stewart in 1991 and *Waterglass* by McGill-Queen's in 1999. He lives on the Niagara Escarpment with his wife and two children.