

And so it goes: *The Hanging Garden* by Shereen Jerrett

And so it goes: The Hanging Garden is an essay by Shereen Jerrett to accompany her introduction to the Cinema Lounge screening of Thom Fitzgerald's film *The Hanging Garden* on Dec. 5, 2012 at the Winnipeg Film Group Cinematheque.

I am talking to my sister on the phone: I am writing an essay, I moan, I feel like I am in university again at end of term. What's it about? she asks. I would rather moan about how horrible it is to write an essay than actually try to explain, but I give it a shot.

It's about the film *The Hanging Garden*, I explain, a Canadian drama that came out in 1997 by Thom Fitzgerald. And then I go into the classic film description opener: "It's about a guy who..."

Except I get a little hung up on the part about Willie seeing his fat adolescent self hanging in the family garden when he goes home to his sister's wedding. See, I say awkwardly, he hung himself and then he ran away.

There is a pause on the other end of the line. "He died?" she finally asks, "then how does he go to the wedding?" She is very pragmatic, my sister.

Well, I said, he didn't really die. It's, like, a metaphor. For all those things that happen in families; incidents that haunt us, and are always just hanging there, bloated and reproachful, whenever we get together. Queering the do, as my father would say.

I can hear that my sister has started to clean her house. If I am going to ramble, she may as well get some work done in the meantime.

"But is he actually hanging there?" she asks.

"Well, yeah, they can all see him," I answer, "it's like he did kill himself. But then he didn't. It's like quantum universes, where all possibilities exist on several parallel planes" I lamely trail out the sentence. I am no scientist, and I am not sure I am even quite right about quantum theory. And at any rate, I am talking out of my hat, because at this point the essay is mostly just a collection of random words, with haphazard phrases like "I think I admire this movie because I love the colours green and violet together so much."

"Don't go all Nova on me," my sister cuts in, interrupting my ruminations on the colour purple, "I am still working out that whole dead live cat in a box thing." She is grunting slightly as she scrubs the tub.

For some reason I cannot stop trying to explain. "OK, you know how that when something traumatic happens in families..." I think to myself, don't go there, don't bring that up, but then, of course, I do. "It's like when Theo got the brain tumour. In real life, he turned out fine - married and successful, even - it's over now. But for you, there is always this damaged part, this haunted memory, one in which your son didn't make it. This has affected you: your life has been stunted by the almost-real outcome that you were forced to consider. Even today, you can still clearly picture what almost happened, and it damages you, in a way. How does somebody get over that? How can you move on after being in such a dark place, when you have to keep staring at it when you pass by, still swinging in the garden of your daily life? This film just makes that a visual image, one that the whole family must see and deal with."

The scrubbing has stopped, there is silence on the end of the phone. Not the disapproving kind, but her thoughtful, intense, I-am-thinking-about-this-hard silence I know so well. I wait it out, see if she gets it now.

“What does he do when he sees himself in the garden?” she finally asks.

“In the film he eventually cuts himself down,” I say, “but some family members would prefer to keep him hanging there. They find comfort in the pain, like running their fingers along a scar that still hurts them.” I am stretching now, trying to find the words that will connect us all, with the film, with her, with the pain and fear we all felt, and still do.

“See, when he ran away from the family, for them all they had was either hang on to the pain or have nothing.” Was that it? I wondered. Why do we all hang on so comfortably to these terrible hurts that were done to and by us? Why don’t we all just cut down those guilty bloated bodies, so well preserved, that hang just out of the corner of our consciousness, in the pretty garden of our past memories, where all the flowers are a symbol for something.

The slosh of water tells me she has moved on to the dishes. “My ear is getting hot,” she complains. I ignore her paltry attempts to hang up, as I can feel my brain starting to fire with inspiration.

“It’s like *Slaughterhouse Five*,” I say declaratively.

“The movie? You are on to another movie now?” she asks.

“No, the book. The Tralfamadorians –”

“Oh God,” she moans, “I hate science fiction. I barely got through *Game of Thrones* with all that dragon crap.”

“No, this is different,” I protest; wrongly, I might add, but I am trying to keep her from hanging up on me, “the Tralfamadorians live their life in four dimensions, and can see their past and future selves all in the same time; so their past stretches behind them and their future in front of them like a caterpillar. We are always living with our past and our future, simultaneously.” I hesitate, as I can feel how tenuous is the limb I have just crawled out on, if she can only hang in there until I can spit it out...

“The Tralfamadorians say that because our past and our future are simultaneously existing, there is no changing it. And so it goes, they say...”

“Do you think mum would like us to take her to Shelmerdine’s to see the Christmas poinsettia display?”

It was a brave attempt to change topics, and I do have a weakness for free eggnog with nutmeg. But it is a classic family feint to get us off an uncomfortable topic. Our family uses the traditional WASP “doesn’t that Christmas arrangement look so nice with the napkins” technique when emotional bombs are dropping. In *the Hanging Garden*, the family achieves the same result with drinking and fighting: it has one of the best wedding sequences I have ever seen in a film. What bride does not want to belabor her bridesmaid with an umbrella, and then guzzle bottled beer from under her veil on Her Big Day? There is a refreshing frankness to the family, they can all see the elephant in the room – and in this case, Willie literally is an obese elephant of an adolescent boy – but nobody knows how to actually squeeze it out the door.

They are all affected by the relentless circular logic of a broken family history. It’s like the dysfunction damages one tire, so the car can never move straight ahead. The ancient blind dog in the film circles round and round the kitchen, bashing his old head bloody on furniture, or worse, falling down the stairs, as he hopelessly tries find a way back to the memory of his comfortable bed. They all weave around each other, the groove deepening into a

rut with repetition, lies tangling tighter with other denials, until they are so swaddled by this weaving no one is able to move forward.

Even the prodigal Willie who has left and came back is not free of this loom's weaving, and he is ensnared in it the moment he returns. But the distance of time and space has given him the freedom to act. And so, in the end, they can all act, if they so choose.

"It's like a piñata," I suddenly interject, "when he cuts himself down, he releases everything, and change is possible."

My sister may or may not have hung up at this point, but I haven't noticed...We will catch up later over spiced eggnog, anyway (she always complains that we never remember she doesn't like eggnog, or pie, and that she takes sugar in her coffee. But I do, actually).

For now, I am suddenly appealed by the idea that it is still within my power to find all those hanging bodies of a troubled past and one by one, boldly cut them down. And as they fall heavily to the ground I am thereby able to change both the present past and future planned, and move on to a new life.

Hopefully in a red sports car: top down, of course.

The calmly fatalistic Trafaladorians would disapprove, but I am all for the Daffodil, March; rebirth and new beginnings.

Shereen Jerrett has filmed everything from vampire castles in Romania, to Leila's Hair Museum in Indiana. She has made documentary films about neurotics, nerds, and family members. She has worked with numerous production companies and teaches filmmaking at the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg. She has taken workshops and seminars across the country, with people from the American Film Institute, Columbia University, Banff Centre, and the Canadian Film Centre. Shereen has also just completed a year with NSI's Features First program, and is in development with a dramatic pilot script.