



Like Weeds

by

Carol Marvin



Urtica dioica

Like Weeds **by Carol Mavor** *Cyanotypes, photographs* *and drawings by* *Annabel Dover*

Once upon a time there was a blue-girl named Annabel who lived in a small village in in the north of England. Her skin was neither blue, nor did she have indigo hair, like Pinocchio's 'Blue Fairy'. But she loved blue and dreamt of blue.

Nevertheless she had ginger hair and was affectionately called Red Squirrel.

Annabel studied nature vehemently, so Red Squirrel was a fitting name, if the wrong colour.

This Girl-Naturalist was a botanist, a zoologist, an entomologist, a lepidopterist, a geologist and an ornithologist. Once she saw a hoopoe outside...

her cottage. Her mean-spirited father would not believe that she had seen this magnificent little bird with its zebra-striped tail and a crest that rises like a feathered Native American war bonnet (Hoopoes are rarely seen in England). But the doubting man was forced to believe Annabel when the story made the papers.

Her father's name was Hector, but he was known as Bluebeard his beard being so black that it appeared blue. He was ugly, although, his beard had an otherworldly, magnetic beauty. Hector was relatively well-off; without Bluebeard, the girl and her beloved granny had nothing, save for their gift of each other and a mutual love for the natural world.

The three of them lived together in a long, damp, thatched house with a huge carved fireplace. There was a bee's nest in the thatch. There was a locked room that Annabel had always been very frightened of.

Once, when looking up a recipe for blueberry pie inside Granny's *Good Housekeeping Cookbook*, Annabel discovered a hidden newspaper clipping announcing *not* the sighting of a hoopoe in her Northern-England village, but of her birth. For the first time, Annabel learned of the existence of her two older sisters. But where? Were they locked up in that room that Bluebeard told her never to open? Annabel had never dared to open that door. Granny feared the door too. But she had no recollection of sisters (or really much of anything for that matter).

At an early age, Annabel began composing her own nomenclature for the colour blue. Her tiny, densely nature-rich, taxonomically inscribed world was a blue marble writ large: like the earth itself.

Annabel's village was famed for its kindly Giant. He was nearly seven feet tall and weighed over twenty-three stone. He was strong. He was gentle. Children loved him. When he walked down the street, you could hear the children in peals of giggles chiming in with his roaring, big laugh. The Giant would carry boys and girls, three to a shoulder, begging them to kick him harder so that he could feel it. Little ones, who were too excited about the newness of their first steps and preferred not to be carried.

They followed along at a brisk trot wearing baby-blue baby reins, complete with tinkling bells. The Girl-Naturalist had once worn these reins and had sat on his shoulders.

One day, on a bet, the Giant carried a huge boulder from the nearby woods all the way to the public house. Like Atlas holding the celestial sphere, he carried the gargantuan stone. As he lifted the rock upon his outsized shoulders, his huge blue jumper (he had to knit his own, because of his enormous size) got caught on a tree and began to unravel with every THUMP THUMP of his immense step. The Giant took no notice of the unknitting of his jumper, but by the time he reached the village, Annabel's very kindly granny, who was wearing a lovely demure hat, did. Her hat looked like a topsy-turvy nest and was fixed with a sweet bow. Inside the hat was the light of the blue moon. She liked to look at this





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blue light of the moon and that is why she wore it so low, nearly covering her eyes. This granny with the hat, like a nest, fixed with a bow, filled with the light of the blue moon, worn topsy-turvy, followed the Giant's blue yarn (like Hansel following the little pebbles) – just as she followed the toads of the nearby forest, warty creatures that she loved as if they were handsome princes. (Who knows, perhaps they were.)

Midway back, after depositing the stone, the Giant took no notice of the granny rolling a colossal blue yarn ball under her arm, nor did he realise that his blue jumper had turned into string. He was so hot and tired after stoically completing his incredible feat, he could only think of water.

As soon as he reached the village's nearby lake, he plunged his body into it and cooled down with a long drink. A kingfisher joined him and gave him a wink. A pike nibbled his huge, big toe. The Giant would soon return home to a feast of a sack of potatoes and a large round of blue cheese.

As the 'Atlas' Giant bathed and drank to his heart's content, Annabel was immersed in a giant Reader's Digest *Atlas of the World*. Annabel's wicked father, who knew that his daughter loved this book, kept it hidden from the poor girl. But Annabel had a keen sense of sight. It did not take her long to find the coveted *Atlas*.

Annabel is reading the *Atlas* (the world made miniature) as an act of petty revenge against Bluebeard. On her ginger head, Annabel is wearing a garland of

leaves. (Annabel likes to bring the outside world in.) She is in a state of wonderlust, looking at her favourite page: a drawing of a blue mineral called Labradorite. It occurs in large crystal masses and produces labradorescence: a play of moonstone colours that flash like light in darkness. Annabel's world (as real as it is imaginary) is an island. It shines an Annabelesque labradorescence, which has a weakness for beautiful blues.

The captivating picture of Labradorite in Annabel's father's *Atlas* is the same colour of blue as Granny's old tube of Winsor & Newton oil paint, infused with real lapis lazuli (from Afghanistan). Through her fingers, the *Atlas* shows Annabel all the pleasures of the world. She whispers the names of plants, rocks and birds by their Latin names.

She learns that Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1570), the world's first atlas, translates as 'the theatre of the world'.

She thinks about how every continent is an island, how every island is a rock, how every rock is a mineral and then... how every mineral is a rock, how every rock is an island, how every island is a continent. So goes the theatre of Annabel's wondering brain: like Russian nesting dolls.

After carefully putting the *Atlas* back into its hiding place, Annabel leaves the study to find her kindly granny sitting in her old comfortable chair with a big, big, big ball of blue yarn.

‘Granny, will you knit me a pair of blue socks to keep my feet warm?’ pleads Annabel.

‘Why, of course, my dear. With all of this yarn, I can knit you a pair of socks, a jumper, a long coat, a pair of mittens, a skirt and a pair of slippers. You will be blue at your edges and in your depths. But I will begin with the socks.’

Granny is a fine knitter. The socks are whipped up in no time.

Annabel pulls on the blue socks with great pride, slides into her shoes and is out the door to play in the forest that welcomes her. She heads out to the little blue lake: an azure eye reflecting the blue sky above her. The day is clear, cool, beautiful. She does not mind the cold. Once, she reaches the water, she pulls off her clothes, jacket, shirt, pants, shoes and blue socks. Down to her knickers and cami, she carefully places her dear knitted socks on the grassy edge of the lake. She splashes her way into the water.

While Annabel is holding her breath and coming eye to eye with a pike, a fox, who is feeling sleepy and over-exposed by the daylight, puts his red and white liquorice-tipped nose inside Annabel’s sock. He puts his great triangular ears inside. He puts his whole head inside. He turns round and round. The sock gets bigger and bigger.

The sock is warm and comfortable and the fox feels like he is in the earthy den of his puphood. Just as he is about ready to go into a sweet, nostalgic sleep, a rat comes by.

‘Can I come in?’ asks the rat.
‘Okay, you can come in if you can fit’ says the fox.

The rat sticks his petite pale pink nose inside the sock. He puts his tiny ears in. He puts his whole head inside. He turns round and round. The sock gets even bigger. In a heap with the fox, the rat feels content and drowsy. Just as he is about ready to go to sleep, two butterflies land on the opening of the outsized sock and ask ‘Can we come in?’

‘Okay, you can come in’ says the fox.

‘If you can fit’ says the rat.

The butterflies have no trouble getting in. It is as if they are back in the cocoons from which they once emerged. They walk about on their miniscule feet and stretch their wings.

The fox, the rat and the two butterflies were almost asleep when a horseshoe bat, pokes his horsy nose into the sock.

‘Can I come in?’ asks the horseshoe bat?

‘We don’t mind’ sing the fox, the rat and the two butterflies in unison.

How the horseshoe bat fumbled his nose and then his huge bat ears (which can even hear the steps of a ladybird walking on a leaf) and then his whole head and even his enormous wings into the sock is a mystery. The bat even managed to turn around. He feels excellent, like he is in a blue cave, but he is still a tiny bit restless. The butterflies are fumbling about and, infuriatingly, he hears each and every one of their delicate movements. The bat asks

the butterflies to quiet down.

Just as the bat is about ready to go to sleep (*not upside down* for the very first time), there is a mysterious, rather hushed ‘pow’. The sock has turned inside out and has popped out the fox, the rat, the two butterflies and the bat.

After her cold, invigorating swim, Annabel is dismayed to find that one of her blue socks has gone missing.

Walking home from her swim with the pike, in just one sock, Annabel comes across the missing sock, which is now far too large for her to wear. She wears the stretched sock, not on her foot, but across her shoulders, like a shawl.

When the kindly granny with the hat, like a nest, fixed with a bow, worn topsy-turvy sees the outsized sock, she is bewildered. Being one not to waste anything, she feels obliged to knit the Giant one to match. After all, she has plenty of blue yarn. (This kindly, but forgetful granny, no longer remembers that the blue yarn came from the Giant in the first place.) Naturally, Granny also knitted a new sock, of the appropriate size, for Annabel.

Annabel and Granny present the Giant with his large blue socks. He is extremely pleased with their colour; they will perfectly match his big blue jumper. But where had he put it? (Often the kindest people are the most forgetful.) While admiring his socks, Annabel tells the Giant about life with her father and her fear of the locked room. The Giant insists that Granny and Annabel live with him in his huge cottage, (without a bee’s nest in the thatch).

While Granny makes tea in their new abode, (she has to use a stool to reach the hob) the Giant sets out to investigate Hector’s locked door.

The Giant is too large to fit in through the door, so he reaches his arm through a window and opens the locked door with the brute force of his hand. The sisters are there, thin and scared. But they are happy to be rescued. The Giant carries them on his shoulders back to his cottage.

It is not long before two more girls join Red Squirrel. Annabel makes garlands for their hair.

Later, *the three graces* return to their father’s cottage to have a secret peek. They seem him thrashing a stick against a clothesline engulfed by a seven-foot common nettle (she whispers *Urtica dioica*) and rosebay willowherb (she whispers *Epilobium augustifolium*). He is trying to find space to hang up his wet clothes. Growing up the side of Father’s house is an overgrown pinewood bracken fern (she whispers *Acrostichum ilvense Linnae*), greedily drinking the overflow of his bathwater. The father’s wild, jungle-like garden is both alarming and beautiful, not unlike his bluebeard. Annabel understands. Her father is overwhelmed and confused by the nature she loves: a love that still grows, like weeds.

To this day, Annabel still wears her blue socks (with holes mended and untended): worn with wonder.

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Carol Mavor

Carol Mavor is Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester. Mavor is the author of four books: *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Duke UP, 2007), *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess, Hawarden* (Duke UP, 1999) *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Duke UP, 1995) and *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans soleil and Hiroshima mon amour* (Duke UP, 2012). Her essays have appeared in *Cabinet Magazine*, *Art History*, *Photography and Culture*, *Photographies*, as well as edited volumes, including Geoffrey Batchen's *Photography Degree Zero* and Mary Sheriff's *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art*.

Mavor's writing has been widely reviewed in publications in the US and UK, including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Village Voice*. She has lectured broadly in the US and the UK, including The Photographers' Gallery, London, University of Cambridge, Duke University and the Royal College of Art. For 2010-2011, Mavor was named the Northrop Frye Chair in Literary Theory at University of Toronto. Currently, Mavor is completing *Blue Mythologies: A Study of the Hue of Blue* (forthcoming from Reaktion in 2013).

Annabel Dover

My childhood, whilst seemingly on the surface to be of a functioning middle class family, was spent with parents who indulged in drama and abuse, where the truth was impossible to decipher and where the objects that surrounded my sisters and I were often the only witnesses to ludicrous acts of fantasy and violence.

Annabel Dover, *Stardust Memories*

Annabel Dover was born in Liverpool and educated in Newcastle and London. She is currently studying for a PhD at Wimbledon exploring a practice lead response to the cyanotype albums of Anna Atkins. A regular exhibitor in the Jerwood Drawing Prize, she has shown her work nationally and internationally, and her next solo exhibition will be hosted by English Heritage at Darwin's House. The Imperial War Museum recently acquired a set of her cyanotypes and the same work will be featured in Carol Mavor's upcoming study, *Blue Mythologies*, published by Reaktion. She herself writes regularly for *Garageland* and is represented by Transition Gallery, London.

Throughout her practice she finds herself drawn to objects and the invisible stories that surround them. Through their subtle representation she explores their power as intercessionary agents that allow socially acceptable emotional expression. The work presents itself as a complex mixture of scientific observation and a girlish enthusiasm which is candidly revealed in her touring lecture *Stardust Memories*.



*Labradorite Feldspar
Asylum Inventory*



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