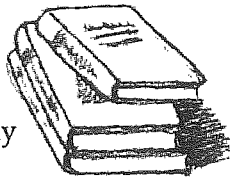


FLORENCE



My great-grandparents walked all the way from Louisiana to Colorado. That was in 1859. They were both freed slaves and they wanted to get good and far from cotton-growing country. They went over the mountains, just to be safe, and homesteaded along the Gunnison River. Which is how my grandfather and my



father and my sisters and I all came to be born there, the first black family in the whole county. My father called them our seedfolks, because they were the first of our family there.

I think of them when I see any of the people who started the garden on Gibb Street. They're seedfolks too. I'm talking about that first year, before there were spigots and hoses, and the toolshed, and new soil. And before the landlords started charging more for apartments that look on the garden.

I would have been in on the garden for sure if it weren't for this arthritis in my hands. Growing up out in the country, I still miss country things. My husband's from here. He doesn't know about the smell of a hayfield and eating beans off the vine instead of from the store. I had to settle for

being a watcher. I wasn't the only one. I'd see others on the fire escapes, or standing on the sidewalk like me. One day I looked up and saw a head in a window moving forward and back. It was a man who'd pulled up his rocking chair. He was watching the gardeners like TV.

My grandmother's sampler, from when she was a girl, said "Be Not Solitary, Be Not Idle." That was easy all those years in the library. Being retired, it's harder. So I try to take a walk every day, which is how I found the garden to begin with. I'd always stop there, to see what was new. I was just a watcher, but I was proud of the garden, as if it were mine. Proud and protective. I remember how mad I got when I saw a man reach through someone's fence by the sidewalk and try to grab a tomato. I said "How dare you!" He pulled back his hand and said

he'd heard it was a *community* garden.

It's sad every fall, seeing it turn brown. Fewer and fewer people there. That very first year was the hardest. It had been such a wonderful change to see people making something for themselves instead of waiting for a welfare check. To see a part of the neighborhood looking *better* every day, and to smell those good smells of growing plants. The green drained away. Then the frost hit. You'd pass and hear those dry cornstalks shaking in the wind as if they were shivering. The pumpkins were about the only color left, and then the boy sold them all. Some people cut up their old plants with clippers and dug them back into the soil. A few covered their ground with leaves. But once that job was done, it was done. By November the cats were the only ones there.

That winter was a cold one. Cold as Colorado. You'd walk by the garden, covered with snow, just the fence tops sticking out, and you'd try to remember it back in July. Someone stuck a Christmas tree there in December. It stayed up until March. It's hard to tell one month from another that time of year. It's all just winter. Because of the weather I missed lots of walks. When I did get out, I couldn't go past the garden without slowing down to look, even though there was nothing growing. Sometimes there'd be one of the gardeners there, just looking too.

You can't see Canada across Lake Erie, but you know it's there. It's the same with spring. You have to have faith, especially in Cleveland. Snow in April always breaks your heart. I think we had two April snows that year. Waiting for the snow to melt was

like waiting for a glacier to move. Finally, it was gone for good. The ground was back, and last year's leaves, like a bookmark showing where you'd left off. It was a joy to get out again. Just to walk without wearing a heavy coat and boots felt like flying. But the garden was still empty. I was disappointed. I suppose it was still too early to plant. I began to wonder if anyone would come. Maybe no one was interested. Or maybe the city had shut it down, or sold the lot. I was worried. Then one day I passed it—and someone was digging.

It was a little Oriental girl, with a trowel and a plastic bag of lima beans. I didn't recognize her. It didn't matter. I felt as happy inside as if I'd just seen the first swallow of spring. Then I looked up. There was the man in the rocker.

We waved and waved to each other.