

Robert is a young degenerate consumed with addictions in the suburbs of Detroit. One morning, he wakes in a fantastic land of talking animals and horrific demons. He embarks on an epic journey to save the forest, and himself.

To Grow in Dirt

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**To Grow in Dirt:
A Fairytale**

Joseph D. Williams

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Hardcover ISBN 978-1-60145-573-4

Paperback ISBN 978-1-60145-571-0

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2008

Table of Contents:

Part I: Phantoms of the Morning.....	1
Part II: Spinning, Spiraling Machines.....	81
Part III: Bleeding Mountain	187
Part IV: The Path.....	275
Part V: The Garden Explored.....	373

ONE

Robert fell asleep abruptly and dreams blanketed him in his bed. He was gone an instant after he had hit the ground, slipping out of consciousness as the morning approached ten o'clock and he began his first slumber in over seventy-two, hard spent hours. He had been out all night, wandering through the moonlit Hines Park with a half-filled bottle of Irish whiskey that he never drank and a fresh package of Marlboro cigarettes that he did not have time to open. The woods were insatiably hilarious while the mushrooms he had taken earlier in the day streamed lines of insanity through the grass. It was not until late that night that he acquired his herb and smoked its delirious leaves into compounded, luminous dust.

By that time, he was quite an unsettling sight, blundering up and down Main Street in the sleeping city with a disgraceful gait. He sauntered in and out of bars for the next while and drank heartily on other people's tabs as they laughed at the dances and songs he performed on smeared, linoleum tabletops. The bars eventually closed. The owners swept up the vomit and alcohol that soaked their wooden floors in preparation for the next day's business. One tired, disgruntled owner in particular, who was anxious to get home to his wife, threw poor Robert out onto the rain-defiled sidewalk, leaving him no recluse from the dawning night.

Joseph D. Williams

Still, he spent several more hours finding his way back toward the park forest, yelling at phantom animals and laughing at children dressed in mournful black who inquired about his belt as they passed him on dimly lit side streets. It was still another hour at least after these apparitions disappeared before his tired body collapsed into a comforting flowerbed deep inside the fortress of Hines Park.

He was, by then, far into the wood away from everything, deep within the harsh life of the forest where he lay peacefully for a time. The sun had reached the hilltops with its golden palm by the hour he ceded to sleep and the world woke around him. Birds chirped their happy welcome into the fiery abyss of summer trees. Herds of animals, small rodents mostly, were leaving their holes in the cool soil for morning jogs and scavenging. Leaves were shaking off the dew and midnight rain of a July storm. Ants piled on more and more to mounds of food and sand, gathering the corpses of their fallen brothers to lay to rest within their luxurious hill. And all of these magnificent events transpired while Robert caught his first shameful glimpse of rest in his bed of abnormally large, pink petal flowers.

The sun was posing seductively through tiny crevices in the high treetops, illuminating the forest floor around the sleeping boy on the very peak of the largest forested hill in the state. Throughout the massive park, which spanned several miles in every direction, dew was wrapping its legs around the aroused blades of grass, and the summer air

To Grow in Dirt

returned from its nocturnal slumber in the far away heavens. The park was warming; preparing itself for the looming July afternoon that would welcome Frisbee-golfers, family picnics, young lovers, joggers, nature enthusiasts, and small children for the rest of the day. Young boys and girls with smiling hearts and eyes were arriving to indulge in the cool creek before it was overtaken by heat and would no longer be refreshing. The creek ran through the right side of the park beside the road before making an L-shape and diminishing under that very road leading back downtown.

The water glistened golden in the sun and refreshed the excitable swans that bathed before the midday heat would carry them into an unpleasant mood. A very faint, whispering breeze, neither hot nor cold, was passing uncontested through the visitors. Yet, the breeze did not sit well at all with those who felt it. Not one bit. They could feel the wind blowing deeply into the leaves and grass. They felt the uncertain rustling of aged branches that had embraced those very patrons for lifetimes.

Tall tales had been told to every child in and around that small town around campfires and through goodnight kisses in mummy-like blankets, warning them of the strange effect of that same morning wind upon that very forest and its inhabitants. It was unnatural, indeed. But for love of the sunny, heaven sent day and the lavish Hines Park with its crystal baseball diamonds and playgrounds of captivating silver, the patrons dismissed the warnings of 'foolish' childhood

Joseph D. Williams

fairytales. Yet, one should always consider that there is no tale too tall to caution, and no tale that lacks magic when dealing with fairies.

More time flew by and waking morning drifted into peaceful afternoon. Dark dreams swirled through Robert's cluttered mind. He stirred violently several times in his sleep, slashing with infuriated arms and legs at the phantoms of the morning that teased him into a tizzy. The tangled trees and achingly bright flowers sheltered him from the mysterious forest around him, a hospitable gesture for them to make while he was an unknowing guest in their home. By three o'clock in the afternoon, he had almost conquered his dreams and was nearly ready to wake. The very last remnants of Robert's nightmares ran their course and he passed on out of the darkness slowly into the light of another day. The sun was high in the crystal blue sky by that time. Guests were wandering in and out of the park steadily still, finding joy in the various, childish activities that they were partaking in.

Robert awoke with a start and rose to his knees instinctively. The black sleep lingered with him for a few more moments before yielding to the white sun and green vitality of the forest afternoon. He held himself up with his hands and knees, digging deeply into the strangely welcoming soil while desperately trying to chase away the effects of another night of alcoholism.

He stayed in stillness there for a while before he realized exactly where he had been sleeping. And yet, try as he might, he could not calculate how he

To Grow in Dirt

had arrived in that flowerbed deep within Hines Park. He dug ferociously through the dungeons of his memory for an answer, but aborted the task when he could not retrieve a thought or action between four o'clock the prior night and where he knelt then.

His clothing was torn nearly to shreds and his beaded, hemp necklace had dislodged itself at some point in the night along with his wallet, watch, phone, and keys. The light green shirt that he wore had somehow darkened in color, nearly fading out the Irish flag on the front of it. His white undershirt was still in fair condition, other than a few unidentified smells and stains, but his jeans had been slashed in many places by the unforgiving branches of the wood and he knew from one glance that he had no prayer of salvaging them. In addition to the injuries perpetrated to his clothing, the beige sandals that he had been wearing had done little in protecting his feet from the needles and sticks of the forest floor. Thus, he bled from the many wounds his poor toes had sustained. Shaggy, black hair covered his eyes and draped over his neck, nearly grazing his shoulders, making it a practical impossibility for him to see more than three feet in any direction.

Robert was a fairly well built twenty-one-year-old. He was not stocky at all in the sense of plumpness or meatiness. In fact, some individuals may have been bewitched into believing that he was skinny on first glance. His sun-darkened skin did indeed rest on very finely cut muscles, however,

Joseph D. Williams

making him stronger than most are at his age and weight (or at any age, for that matter).

He tried to rise up from his kneeling position to stand, but the beautifully intricate weave of the forest plants, along with the increasingly painful headache that he bore, made sure that his efforts proved futile.

“I guess I’ll just sit down here for a while,” he moaned aloud to nobody in particular. Robert winced and moved his hand to his throbbing throat upon noticing the hoarse, scratchy tone of his normally ample voice. The noise that reverberated from his vocal chords seemed foreign and sad.

Craning his neck around to cover all angles of perception, Robert realized that he could not see beyond the mammoth, pink petals of the beautiful flowers, even with his hair pulled behind his ears. The strong, heavenly scent of the flowerbed was nearly too much for him to bear in his weakened state, and he considered the nature of those peculiar botanical specimens with mild nausea.

“Plants on steroids...” he mumbled to himself blandly.

His joking could not spare him from a sense of wonder, however, at the massive plants. They were each nearly the size of a full-grown tree, though they unmistakably were floral, and he swore to himself that he had never seen such magnificence in all of his life. After several wasted moments of contemplation, he convinced himself that, since he had not seen much of the world beyond his own town and certainly never been that deep into the

To Grow in Dirt

forest, his suspicions about the flowers could be dismissed as a result of his ignorance and provincial thought. Therefore, instead of debating the issue further or pressing onward to begin his day, Robert simply sat down, basking in the enchanting scent of the midsummer afternoon in the endless wood and sighed in contentment.

Though his headache was growing more acute and memory more vague, Robert relaxed in the comforting knowledge that it would all go away; knowledge that he had acquired from terrible experience in the Morning After, and even more enviable experiences in the Night Before. He continued to sit Indian-style for several minutes, looking about him in his bed to try and identify the welcoming chirps of nearby birds.

When he finally felt motivated enough to make another attempt at standing, hunger was already beginning to sink its gluttonous fangs into his stomach. Robert braved its rumblings and a nagging headache and rose to exit the peaceful flowerbed. The weaving, mystical patterns of the colorful leaves were hard for him to turn away from, but he knew that he could not delay any longer. His roommate was undoubtedly back at their apartment by then and would most likely surmise that Robert was in trouble again if he did not arrive downtown soon, for he had not been home in more than three days.

So, onward he trekked, trudging heavily through the queerly tall, turquoise grass towards the edge of his abode. But once he had walked what he judged to be one hundred feet, he realized that the exit was

Joseph D. Williams

much further away than he had originally imagined. He had not moved at all from where he had started, yet the scenery seemed to be changing. Or maybe he was just hungry. Maybe he was just hung over.

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