

The Secret Language of Walls

by Leona Francombe

Leaf season has arrived, and with it the intricate footwork of neighbourhood relations. These are complex manoeuvres in Belgium – as befits a complex country – and in the old quarters of Brussels, where lofty, pensive walls prevail, this civics contra dance may take a year to learn, or it may take 20. It all depends on the weather, on the unruliness of a hedge or tree, and on the height of your garden wall. Autumn is the best time to see how well you have learned the steps.

In a strange paradox, gardening seems to reach its apex in Brussels after the summer is over. It is not gardening, really, despite much sweeping and snipping and raking, but rather a tender letting go. This sudden burst of activity prolongs the joys of summer, rituals rendered even more precious now that they are finite: furtive sunbathing during working hours; the last barbecue on a crisp evening; a new appreciation of waning flowerbeds. For everyone knows what lurks around the corner. Need I say it? Veils of dampness, and a thousand shades of grey. You know the rest.

Avenue René Gobert in Uccle used to have a more bucolic name – Avenue des Pâquerettes – until daisies made way for heroes after Lieutenant René Gobert was shot by the Germans in 1943. In fact, the old part of the avenue dates to before World War One, and there is no mistaking the architecture: the marriage of iron and stone, stained glass and brick soars with a bourgeois *hauteur* even Paris would envy. Brussels is awash with such beauties. But all is not splendour and ornament. Some good old Belgian pragmatism is also at work here, for these houses are ever-ready for the invader. You need a force majeure to penetrate a wall from within (try hanging up a framed picture), let alone from without. The architects of the early 1900s must have sensed that the century would bring conflict – few centuries in Belgium, after all, have been free of uninvented guests – and they built their masterpieces accordingly.

The gardens were constructed with the same resolve. They are secretive places, wrapped in high walls and draped with lush, twisting greenery. During much of the year, the most action one can hope for in these dank canyons is the occasional passage of a snail, or the blackbird's quick, light step. Deep-red tiles cap white-washed bricks, and for sensitive imaginations on a sunny day, the effect can give the illusion of the South. But as with many things in this country, the effect is just trickery, and the reality something else altogether. These hideaways were

designed to deflect and dissuade; they could keep out entire armies without breaking a tile. The gardens conceal far more than a faint sigh for Italy: epic family sagas, closed to all onlookers, play out behind the mouldering bricks; pungent details of history still linger darkly under the moss. On a quiet day, you can even hear the walls whispering: leave us alone with our memories; we are closed for business. Then autumn arrives, and neighbours emerge.

Even when afoot, the inhabitants over the wall are invisible. They can be perceived through other senses, however, as the walls sharpen odours and acoustics and foster innuendo. At 18:30 every day, a tantalising hint of garlic drifts in from the Chinese restaurant five walls over, the sign that ducks are roasting and it's time to start our own dinner. Garden conversations, suddenly audible, ripple up over the tiles. As we clip and rake, we learn that the student on the right side has flunked his *examen de passage*, and that the barbecue on the left caught fire the evening before (there is a singed branch on our tree). The

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man behind the back wall has had trouble again, either with his daughter or his leaf blower, the only two things that make him raise his voice. We can see nothing, of course, but these ventriloquisms lure us in. We have become

adept at a peculiarly local form of communication: the art of seeing while looking away, a practice that does not, incidentally, require walls.

At length the leaves begin to fall and relations intensify, though visibility remains scant. The towering linden that belongs to the leaf-blowing man fills our garden at the first wind, as it does every year, but he is not the sort to apologise. His wife, however, offers me sympathetic, sidelong glances at the butcher's. I sense an opening, and delicately mention the leaves while she waits for her *entrecôte*, but it will be another year before her husband prunes the tree. The score is then settled, and the walls resume their brooding. Autumn unveils her palette of greys, and we add a few new steps to the contra dance.



GERALDINE SERVANS