

From Soils, a Living Canvas
—a tribute to Richard J. Naskali,
director of the UI Arboretum & Botanical Gardens, 1987-2003

“If you seek his monument, look around you.” —Sir Christopher Wren

Naskali walked a tract of land, beheld
its soil, moiled its stubborn crab grass,
dandelion, shrubs and saplings sown by wild
Palouse wind, water—passing grouse and quail,
coyote, raccoon, red-tail hawk, Peregrines,
Northern flickers, red-breasted robins, wrens.

This man, this Naskali, labored
with earth, cleared brush and weed,
brought life to life, painted
a living landscape for students
to study root, trunk, branch, leaf, bud, blossom—
to harvest—seed, spore, nut, cone, fruit—feeding
more than nature, feeding students more than
lessons of how things grow, suffered seasons
for youth who thought to become doctors—
who did not, could not, with the guiding hand
of this man, this Naskali, whose eye for
growing built more than an arboretum;
this man curated living museums for all seasons,
for July concerts with locals that carried it all:
sandwich suppers on quilted lawn, folding
chairs, Moscow regulars, year after year,
filling the cooling air with warm applause.

This man, this Naskali, spent hours here
between homes with spacious decks and sunset
views of crowning trees and fairways and greens.
He studied contours of ground, its run-off,
its mark for water and a winding stream,
its place for ponds for Canada goose,
nesting mallard, wading heron—willow,
whose roots seek water as the returning fowl.

This man, this traveler,
this finder of beauty the world over—
of green forested trees and shrubs by groves,
planted forsythia, bearberry, viburnum—
Hostas varied as Lenox, Wedgwood—

grapes and clematis vining, quinces, blood grass,
butterfly bushes, Korean dogwoods,
smoke trees, Jewelberry crabapple, sumacs,
quaking aspens, ornamental willows,
daylilies, sunflowers, kale too pretty
to eat, all an exposé of science.

This man made an Eden,
a path for family portraits,
memorial monuments,
joggers, walkers,
birders, insect collectors, strolling lovers
holding hands; for mothers, fathers, who let
their children be children—to run, dawdle, touch;
for gardeners seeking that one specimen tree,
that paperbark maple—that red buckeye,
that Colorado blue spruce—those budding magnolias,
so many from this palette
showcasing creation
gathered from three continents,
a botanist's heart enlarged,
hands sacrificed, a legacy,
an optical exposure like Monet's
Poplars, bringing this man's long work
to know this hollowed place of trees, of gardens
is more than a park; this fiery man,
this teacher first, set his land canvas straight,
envisioned a higher calling,
a higher learning,
a perfection of plants for students,
whose eyes see through his, a testament
by his own work.

—Susan Hodgins
Moscow Poet Laureate

Note: This poem was written for the Mayor's Arts Award Banquet, held Thursday,
October 25, 2018, at the 1912 Center in Moscow.