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ENG 100: Things That Belong in the Garden

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Bradely Murff

Essay 1

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Things That Belong In The Garden

The summer after sixth grade, my mother still worked in DC. Her garden was left deathly and desolate. I was the same. I slept through every day like a dry stalk stuck in the dirt. So, one quiet night, I set my alarm for 6am. The morning came, and I stood shivering in the garden to watch the sunrise in perfect silence. The sunlight washed over the shriveled leaves, the fence tangled up in the weeds, the pile of old wood pallets, and me. I spent the rest of the day awake. My mother's garden brought her joy, taught me about death, helped my dad express his love for us, and let me come to terms with the end of my childhood.

I was still young enough for my parents to carry me when I found a dead bird in our yard. I yelled at the cat that was attacking it, thinking it still had a chance at life. I was hopeful, not naive. My parents kept alpacas. When they died, we loaded them into the wheelbarrow and carted them to the end of the driveway, where they would be picked up by carcass disposal workers. I knew how death worked. I opted not to pick up the bird's small body with gloves, but with a particularly large leaf I found on the ground. It was still a little warm. I brought it to my mother's garden, where the strawberries had long died. Even then, my memories of berry picking in the summer heat were distant. Everything in that dirt was shriveled and brown, including the straw. I stood on the far side of the garden, crouched down, and opened a small hole in the dry straw to place the bird's body. I laid it there and covered it in the straw. It was clover season, so I

picked a small bouquet of those purple and white flowers for the bird, and set it over the gravesite. Weeks went by. I never told my parents what happened. They didn't want to know I was picking up dead things with my hands. I didn't want them to know either. They still sent me outside to play every day, but I kept away from that end of the garden. One day, I noticed the lump in the straw was gone. I worried that the bird had been taken and eaten by some animal. When I pulled back the straw, I didn't find a body. I found an undisturbed skeleton. Every bone was in place like an anatomical diagram, but with black flecks of still-rotting feathers and tendons. All at once, I knew what death looked like. It looked like something that belonged in the garden.

Come the spring of 2020, my mother did not work in DC anymore. She had no more flights at dawn on Mondays or midnight on Fridays. It was the end of the great commute. With this change came a renaissance of all my mother's hobbies, including her garden. First, she planted the onions. Then she planted the flowers. Next, the tomatoes. The garden grew upwards, outwards, and into itself. My mother grew a great big smile on her face, accompanied with a lot of dirt. I watched her wipe it off, and I wondered if she just should have become a farmer all those years ago. My mother used to work for NASA. She worked with a private contractor, training astronauts to perform scientific research while in space. Her work helped advance humanities knowledge of the world, but I will never know exactly how. When my mother tells stories from that time in her life, she tells me of the 24-hour migraines immediately after launch. Her more recent jobs are not nearly as intense. They're just a mix of corporate jargon and psychological warfare. Nothing she can't handle. Her work stories would eat up every conversation, until she came back to the garden, of course. As soon as one of us asked her how

the garden was coming along, she had pleasant things to say. Work no longer lives at the dinner table. My mother now leaves it at the desk.

My father's best work *was* the dinner table. His southern mother taught him that food was love, and love was food. He measured his ingredients, in grams, with a scale. (Yes, he also worked for NASA.) He was disappointed when he didn't make something perfectly. He saw it as a failure to love his family. Unfortunately, that perfectionism extended to the rest of us. It was an unspoken rule that grades were not to fall below a 95. No door should be shut too loudly. No one's posture should slip, especially not when talking to my father. It was hard to please him. It was even harder to know when you had pleased him. I often worried that I would never earn his love. No matter our failures, though, he always cooked us dinner. When my mother brought the garden back to life, we were suddenly much more involved in the meal prep. It seemed that when the ingredients were coming from our own family, my dad thought it was right to involve us in their preparation. While we once were silently banned from the kitchen when my father cooked, we were now requested for assistance. "Go ask mom if we have any cucumbers coming in," He'd say, "actually, no. Ask her how many." I was good at peeling and slicing the cucumbers the way my brother wanted them. My brother was good at not putting tomatoes in my salad. Our mother was still very good at growing things. My father never stopped asking for better work than we could give. His criticism still hurt. Dinner, however, was even better than it always had been. We would joke about how "we don't buy tomato sauce from the store. We just give mom the seeds and wait." My father didn't laugh at that, but he smiled, because his children were learning how to cook.

Months and years blended together in the pandemic. Winter may have come and gone. I'm not sure. There simply came a time, late summer, early fall, when I knew I would be leaving

soon. College was calling. Things were changing. Two of our oldest trees just got too old. We had to cut them down. We piled the sticks up high, and we had bonfire after bonfire. It lasted months. Our parents had taught us to never leave a fire unattended, so someone always had to keep watch. When it came to the end of the day, I was unspokenly declared the nightwatch. My father was the one with a pyrotechnics license, but I had trained under him. I was also the only one willing to stand outside in the dark. In truth, I could have just put it out and gone to sleep, but I loved being out there with the fire. It was bright, welcoming, and warm. The dark gave me privacy, but the outdoors gave me total freedom. I got very good at keeping a small fire going for a long time. I danced around it like a witch from a story book. I sang songs to myself while twirling burning sticks. I stared up at the sky for far too long. My parents had never appreciated dancing and singing in the house. They disliked most common signs of childhood. I had always hid the louder and more active parts of myself to please them, and ate away at me. But they were not outside with me, and I wasn't a child anymore. In my mother's garden, I found the privacy I needed to be true to myself. In the quiet and the dark, I finally became comfortable with the parts of myself that I had never acknowledged before. I grew into someone separate from my parents idea of me. I have the garden to thank for that.

My mother's garden was many places. It was a place of learning, a place of love, a place of joy, and a place of personal freedom. The summer after sixth grade, when I stood in my mother's garden to watch the sunrise, I felt like I belonged there. I've found that this feeling hasn't faded, despite all the time that has passed. My only hope for the future is that I can make a garden like my mother's. I don't know what kind of food and flowers I might grow, but I know that they will belong there.