

Growing Into Myself
By Niccola Lutri

I like to think that instead of growing in a womb, I grew from the soil.

I didn't come into this world screaming and crying and kicking and covered in gunk. Instead, I sprouted up toward the sun in my garden and leaned over to the few beams of sunlight that crept through the oak trees. I didn't open my eyes to the harsh, cold hospital light or to a nurse who wouldn't remember my name; I was embraced by the wind. I emerged next to the tulips that had patiently waited all winter for the sun to tempt them out, their petals drunkenly painted by the sunlight.

When I see the neighbors' gardens, they look as if they are being suffocated. The perfectly manicured grass, always kept at a uniform height of two inches, accompanied by rows and rows of perfectly placed flowers devastated me. It's unkind to govern the earth's growth, and in my garden, I have given the earth the space to grow.

There are no grids of plants in the garden; it's unruly and unkempt. There is no law or order in this space; the grapevines crawl up the fences rather than their designated posts, the weeds permeate the ground and create an unnavigable maze. The tulips are free to grow as they please, the lilies are planted with no organization, wood chips and pebbles are free to make their homes wherever they might land. The grass and moss colonize the naked soil; the marigolds, scattered across the garden, wave to me. The only sound that saturates the garden is the breeze that kisses the petals and stalks of the flowers that stretch toward the sun.

My garden is my home, but it hasn't always been. It didn't yet exist. I can pretend all I want that I grew from the soil. I can craft "a story that makes me drunk" on peace and "feeds me glory," but the grim reality is, like almost everyone else, a nurse's blue plastic glove was the first

thing that touched me.¹ I didn't see the sun when I opened my eyes for the first time, only the uninviting fluorescent light of the hospital room.

I grew with all the other kids, but the world was stifling. Like my neighbors' lawns, I felt suffocated, forced into meticulously organized categories and labels. And for so long, I never grew beyond those labels, never attempted to know my truest self.

But during high school, when I was searching for who I was and who I was not, the garden was built at the far end of my backyard. I was not physically born from the soil and fed by the sun, but, it is in this garden that a new piece of myself was born that had been missing all my life.

In the garden, I was able to achieve the peace within that I had been chasing for so long, envious of those who had been able to reach it before I had. There was the moment when my lungs swelled in my chest as I breathed in the fresh air of the garden filled with love. I tasted the sun on my skin and drank it until I got dizzy. I felt my heartbeat steadily in my chest, the blood flowing in and out of my soul, and I finally felt thankful for everything that worked so hard to keep me going.

I gained a new appreciation for the small details of life. Just as I had put so much care into each plant that crossed my path, each plant had worked just as hard. I examined life starting at a cellular level, admiring and recognizing how hard every plant cell worked to keep a marigold or tulip or even the weed that protruded through my garden alive and thriving. I began to appreciate the work each of my cells put into keeping me able to breathe. I gained a new enriched perspective on life, how hard each little cell and each person, including myself, worked to just keep going.

¹ Allison, Dorothy. "Place," *The Writer's Notebook*, 2009, pp. 5-9.

I created a space where the vines soar to the sky like skyscrapers, where the earth grows with no limits, and it is here that I feel the most peace, the most secure. In the garden, I am free of any judgment, of all expectations, and of every limitation. The garden is a place to grow.

And I have grown.